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INVINCIBLE MINNIE

ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

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BY
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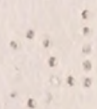
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A LITTLE FOREWORD

THIS is not intended to be a romantic story, or a realistic story—not a tale of anything that ever did happen, only of something which *might have happened*. If you know a Minnie, as you very likely do, you will admit that, whether or not she is actually guilty of such deplorable exploits as herein narrated, she is certainly *capable* of them. Capable of *everything*!

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BOOK ONE: THE CAMPAIGN OPENS

INVINCIBLE MINNIE

CHAPTER ONE

I

MR. PETERSEN rode along in the choking dust, considering the problem with perplexity but with good-humour. After all, it was absurd. . . . He wanted to be kind, but he didn't want to be ridiculous.

In spite of himself, a grin came over his face. He was remembering his last visit to the old lady. He had ridden out to the miserable old farm and very politely introduced himself as her new landlord. He had bought the place for next to nothing, and, considering this, and the dilapidated state it was in, his sensitive conscience required that he should reduce the rent. But he never got so far as to propose this.

The old lady received him with lofty affability and invited him to sit down in her parlour, then left him there for a long time while she prepared refreshments. He had waited awkwardly enough, touched by the shabbiness of the place and its evident decline. Old mahogany furniture, ugly in style, but *good*—once very good—and now so battered, arms gone, legs gone, splinters torn off, cushions disgorging hair, springs sagging. His skilful fingers longed to be at it.

She came in again, with a plate of cookies and a jug of lemonade, and sat down at a little table to dispense them, with a regal air.

"Well!" she said, with a grim smile, "I suppose you've come about the rent, Mr. Petersen. I might as well be

frank. I haven't got it. I've had orders for some preserves, so perhaps I'll have it next month. I hope so, I'm sure. But you can't draw blood from a stone, Mr. Petersen."

He had gone away that time utterly defeated, and he was returning now without much hope. What was one to do in such a case? Impossible to turn out the poor little old woman of seventy, alone on earth. He didn't need the money from the house, he was quite able to permit her to live there free for the rest of her life, but that would be, he saw, a ridiculous thing to do. Unbusinesslike. Fantastic. *She* would laugh at him, and so would everyone else. People would be sure to find out, and his reputation as a shrewd and sensible man would suffer. And although he was a Socialist, and opposed to the paying of rents, his common-sense forbade exceptions. Either no one must pay rent, or everyone must.

He pulled up his horse and wiped his face, for the house was in sight and he was anxious to look well in the eyes of the queenly and provoking old lady. She was a Defoe, and married to a cousin Defoe, and this was, to her, a fact of immense significance. From it she derived her superiority to everyone else. She regarded Mr. Petersen as nobody at all, and a foreigner at that. He was aware of her attitude, and not at all pleased, for he had his own modest pride.

He even went so far as to take out a small pocket mirror and smooth his moustache—a long yellow moustache, standing out fiercely like a cat's. His appearance was at no time satisfactory to him; it was rather too Socialistic. He was an enormous fellow of five and thirty, with huge hands and a blunt red face, handsome in a way, but certainly lacking in distinction, certainly not an exterior to commend itself to a Defoe.

He was quite correctly dressed in riding breeches and a linen jacket, all fitting very well, but all the more offensive to a Defoe because of their excellence. In Brownsville Landing people of Mr. Petersen's class didn't ride horseback under any circumstances; above all, not in clothes designed for such a purpose. It was presumptuous and it was foreign.

The old lady saw him from the window, cantering along the almost obliterated driveway, and by the time he had dismounted and tied his horse to an old apple tree, she was standing in the doorway, in the attitude of a tenant insolvent but unbowed.

"Good day!" she said. "Step in, Mr. Petersen!"

So once again he went into that parlour, dim and cool, aged and forlorn like herself, and once more sat down to wait for the cookies and the lemonade which he detested.

But this time it was not the old lady who brought them in. It was Minnie. Minnie, until that instant unknown to him, unimagined, but predestined to his ruin. . . .

II

He was, innocently enough, pleased with her appearance, and saw nothing sinister, nothing extraordinary about her. A rather short, full-bosomed young woman of perhaps twenty, with a dark, freckled face and an expression very pleasant and friendly. She smiled at him as soon as she entered.

"Mrs. Defoe will be back in a minute," she said, as she set down her tray. She was wearing a ruffled little apron tied about her neat waist, and her air was altogether housewifely and homely, as if she had been brought up from infancy in that very house. He couldn't imagine who she was. He knew that the old lady lived

alone, had lived alone since the death of her husband twelve years ago. This agreeable young person was certainly not a servant, and he was sure she didn't belong in the neighbourhood. If he had seen her, he knew he would have remembered her.

She gave him a glass of lemonade and sat down opposite him, amiably prepared to entertain him.

"It's growing warm, isn't it?" she said, and he recognised in her voice and accent something far superior to the native language of Brownsville Landing.

"It's what we want, for the fruit," he answered, in his sing-song drawl. "It was a cold Spring here."

"So I've heard. . . . What a *nice* horse! Is it yours, Mr. Petersen?"

He was very much pleased; he said it was, and went on to tell of the virtues and eccentricities of his beloved mare.

Minnie said she didn't ride, but was very fond of driving.

Riding suited Mr. Petersen better; it made one feel more independent.

"Oh, well, you're a *man*!" said she. "A girl can't go riding about alone, very well."

In some way this made him suddenly conscious of her smallness and feminineness and of all the handicaps imposed upon her by God and by man. Mr. Petersen's views about women were definite. She was neither above nor below, neither hallowed nor accursed, but a quite ordinary human being, like himself, equally responsible, equally privileged. A woman—the right sort—was a friend, simply. And he saw in Minnie a friend, candid and good-tempered. . . . (Minnie a *friend*!)

"I was so *pleased*," she went on, "to find a horse here. Of course, I don't really know much about them. I've never lived in the country, really. But I *love* animals.

All animals. And I think I have a sort of knack with them——”

He was acquainted with Mrs. Defoe's horse, a ridiculously coy old skeleton that came into the village once a week harnessed to a buggy and driven by a Negro truck farmer who cultivated the old lady's arid fields on shares. He could not imagine anyone's having much affection for that caricature. It touched him. He could think of nothing to say, and the young woman had once more to start up a conversation.

“I hope I haven't made your lemonade too sweet!” she began, anxiously, but was interrupted by Mrs. Defoe calling from upstairs.

“Minnie! Minnie!”

“Excuse me,” she murmured, and vanished. He heard her running up the stairs, then not another sound for a long time. He sat still, with his glass in his hand, and waited.

She didn't run down; she came slowly, with obvious reluctance.

“I'm very sorry,” she said, “but—Mrs. Defoe wants to know—if you'd be good enough to—wait just a *little* longer——”

She was very much distressed; said something about preserves and next week and the expensiveness of jelly glasses. Mr. Petersen's face turned still redder.

“Pshaw!” he said, awkwardly, “It doesn't matter to *me*. I can wait any length of time. Don't worry. Tell Mrs. Defoe not to worry. I—perhaps she will send a message when she's ready——”

“*Positively* next Tuesday,” said Minnie, firmly. “And I'm *dreadfully* sorry, Mr. Petersen. I appreciate your kindness.”

She held out a small plump hand which he grasped earnestly.

"But just the same, who is she?" he asked himself as he rode away.

III

He went home to his house on a shady street of the village, and strolled into the kitchen where his housekeeper was cooking a rabbit.

"Mrs. Hansen," he said, "who's that up at Mrs. Defoe's?"

Of course she knew.

"Her granddaughter, Mr. Petersen. Two of them," she answered, eagerly, delighted at being questioned. "They came from New York a week ago. Two young orphans. Just lost their father. He was thought to be rich, but it seems he wasn't. He didn't leave them a penny. And they've been brought up to expect the best of everything, so I've heard. It's sad, isn't it, Mr. Petersen?"

He thought it was; the phrase "two young orphans" stuck in his mind, and while he walked about his garden, inspecting his trees and vegetables, he reflected on it. "Young orphans." He remembered that she had been wearing a black dress, and that the ribbons in her little apron had been black. And there had been a sobriety in her bearing. . . .

Mrs. Hansen wished to pursue the subject. She began when she had put his excellent dinner on the table.

"Excuse me, Mr. Petersen," she said—he wouldn't allow "sir"—"But which of the young ladies did you see? I hear that one of them is very handsome."

He reflected. No, Minnie was not very handsome; *nice* looking, and with fine dark eyes, but not handsome.

He smiled a little.

"It's hard to say. I'm not a judge, Mrs. Hansen. The one I saw was dark——"

"They're both dark. But one's——"

"This rabbit stew is very good, Mrs. Hansen," he interposed, and she took the hint and left him to read the local paper in peace, as was his custom during dinner.

Afterwards he went out to sit on his little porch and smoke. And thought very kindly of the "young orphan," who hadn't a penny.

The least he could do, he decided, was not to trouble them about the rent—a decision which suited them, apparently, for he neither saw nor heard anything of the Defoe family for a long time. In fact, until he was needed by one of them.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Two years previously Mr. Petersen had arrived in Brownsville Landing and had rented an office in the most up-to-date building there was, putting up a modest sign, "Christian Petersen, Lawyer." The other lawyers, who announced themselves LL.D's, laughed at his sign, but all the same, in spite of it, or perhaps because of its old-fashioned simplicity, he attracted clients from the beginning. People liked him; he was careful, polite and he knew his business. Although a foreigner, he was not offensively eccentric or ridiculous. There were one or two little things, such as riding a saddle horse, and wearing breeches and leggins, which were not approved of, nor was his polite avoidance of any social relations. Still, he was always friendly and antagonised no one.

After six months of legal practice, he branched out unexpectedly. A new sign appeared under the old one: "REAL ESTATE." Now he began making money in earnest. The town was growing, new factories were building, and he knew how to take advantage of the growth.

It was a horrible, squalid little town, too near the city for any but the pettiest of retail trade to flourish, too far for any influence of urbanity. It was technically on the Hudson River, but as a matter of fact, the river bank was used exclusively for commercial purposes, freight yards and so on, and the town itself lay in a little hollow, which was stiflingly hot all summer long.

There were the old people, whose families had lived there for generations, who had old Colonial houses and furniture; they looked with alarm and hostility upon the new element, the workers in the mills, the factories, the brick yards, this foreign-born, incomprehensible rabble, which was, nevertheless, the life blood of the town, which sustained three savings banks and fourteen saloons, which lay dead drunk by the roadsides, and crowded the public library. Then there were "new people," factory managers, and their like, who were respectable and well-to-do, but not "*quite*" . . . And with all these people Mr. Petersen was perfectly at home, buying, selling, renting, and arranging for them all.

Before long a third sign appeared: "CONTRACTOR." And in this capacity he had perhaps his greatest success. He began with the building of some little cottages for the workers in a cotton mill, and he was so excellent and painstaking and experienced a supervisor that his fame spread rapidly. He explained with simplicity that as a boy in the "old country" he had been apprenticed to a builder. And although a lawyer, he was not at all ashamed of this; he was, on the contrary, quite proud of his thorough knowledge of the trade.

He was a Swede, son of a poor man, and self-educated, but there were few people in the town who spoke English as well as he did, in spite of a singing drawl and an indefinably exotic note.

II

He was sitting, this summer morning, at his desk, in his shirt-sleeves, reading a contract with twofold attention, once as a lawyer, once as a builder. His door was open, and when someone knocked, he called out, "Come in!" without turning his head. He expected to be spoken to, and when he wasn't, he looked up to see

who could be there, waiting in silence. And saw a most splendid young creature, tall, broad-shouldered, with a healthy sunburned face of vivid colouring and severely perfect features, eager, vigorous, yet full of a fine young dignity.

He rose at once and put on his coat.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, with his invariable politeness.

The girl's brown face flushed, but she answered without hesitation.

"I'm Frances Defoe—Mrs. Defoe's granddaughter, you know. My sister told me how nice you'd been about—Grandma and the rent, so I thought perhaps you'd be good enough to—oh, to give *me* a little advice."

"Please sit down," he said cheerfully. "Now!"

"I want something to do, work of some sort. I heard that you were the most progressive man in the village, so I thought you'd be the best one to consult."

He was pleased and embarrassed by the compliment, which he knew to be merited.

"I don't suppose," she went on, in her clear, somewhat imperious voice, "that there's much opportunity here, is there?"

He had found opportunities enough; still he answered, no, not many, but that perhaps——

"Have you had any sort of experience?" he asked.

She said no; but that she'd studied a lot and was good at mathematics and figures in general, and knew something of French and German.

"And I can type a little," she added. "I used to do my essays and things on a typewriter at college."

"Fine!" said Mr. Petersen. "Now, let's see where that would fit in."

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, thinking in his slow and prudent fashion.

At last he brought his glance back to the girl.

"If you'd care for it," he remarked, "there's an opening here. I need a young lady to help me, to be in the office while I'm out, to answer the telephone and so forth. It's not much of a place—not more than eight dollars a week to begin——"

He paused.

"If it would suit you——"

"Oh, yes!" she cried. "If you think I'd *do*!"

He smiled; he had sufficient imagination to comprehend the thrill of a first job.

"Suppose we try then," he said. "Let's see. . . . This is Friday. Next Monday at nine, Miss Defoe."

She gave him a bright, a grateful smile, and got up, ready to go.

"I'm awfully glad to get such a chance," she said. "I hope I'll be satisfactory."

Mr. Petersen also rose.

"Mrs. Defoe quite well?" he enquired.

"Yes; at least she says so. She never complains."

"And—I believe it was your sister I spoke to——"

"Minnie? Oh, she's always well," she answered, carelessly, and with still another glowing smile, went off, elated.

Undoubtedly she was the handsome one—a striking figure. But somehow, for him, at any rate, lacking the peculiar charm of her plainer sister; that sober and matronly young creature in the little apron.

He felt a most Quixotic interest in both of the "young orphans." He would have done a very great deal for them. In fact, he *did*. . . .

III

He was surprised and disappointed when she didn't appear on Monday morning. At half past ten he gave

her up and went out about some business, reflecting upon the instability of women. He came back in half an hour, and had just sat down at his desk when she entered, terribly flushed and dusty. Her expression was defiant, but her voice suspiciously uncertain.

"I'm very sorry to be so late," she said. "It won't happen again. I had to walk, and I missed the way. But I'll arrange better after this."

To hide his own distress and hers, he promptly gave her something to type—he didn't care what—and sat down at his own desk, where he pretended to work. But he *knew*, without venturing to turn his head, that she was stealthily wiping her eyes, and he was sure there had been some serious trouble at home. A five-mile walk along that dusty road, on an August day! Poor girl!

There had indeed been a classic and unforgettable encounter, ending in a drawn battle. She couldn't get it out of her head, no matter how she tried to concentrate her attention on this new work.

In the first place, her sister and her grandmother had both protested passionately against her plan as soon as they heard of it. She had gone home triumphantly to tell them that she had a "job" at eight dollars a week, in Mr. Petersen's office.

"Why, child!" cried the old lady, affronted. "What an idea!"

She was really shocked. A Defoe working for a Petersen!

Minnie, too, was shocked; they both argued, reasoned and expostulated, but to no avail. Then Minnie, to the point:

"How do you expect to get there, Frankie?"

Her sister was slightly crestfallen.

"I thought you'd drive me in," she admitted, "I'd pay you for it."

"Thank you!" said Minnie, coldly. "But I couldn't possibly. At that time in the morning, with all the work to be done."

"Very well," said Frankie, "I'll walk."

She was confident that when the time came, Minnie would yield, Minnie who was so kind-hearted, so self-sacrificing. And she couldn't believe it when Monday morning actually came, and she remained obdurate.

"I said I wouldn't, and I *won't*," she repeated. "I don't approve of your working for that man, and I certainly shan't help you in any way."

Frances had no idea how to harness the horse; she was at her sister's mercy, absolutely.

"Minnie, don't be such a beast! And a prig. You're not my nurse, you know. I'm old enough to decide for myself."

"Decide everything you like," Minnie replied, "but I shan't help you in such a nasty, undignified affair. I can't stop you. Why don't you walk? You said you would."

Frances looked at her with blazing scorn.

"You darned little hypocrite!" she cried. "Very well, I *will* walk, if it takes me all day."

She wasn't even sure of the way. She strode doggedly along in the dust and the scorching sun, furious and defiant, for more than two hours.

"I'll walk back and forth every day," she said to herself, "if it kills me. I won't give in to her. She always gets her own way. Not this time, though. I'll wait till I get my first pay, and then I'll hire someone. I won't give up this job!"

Twelve o'clock came.

"You're a stranger here," said Mr. Petersen, "perhaps you don't know where to go for lunch. If you'd do me the honour, this first day——"

She was not quite sure what was the proper course for a business woman, but she knew that Mr. Petersen was absolutely "all right," and to be trusted, so she accepted, and went up the street to the Eagle House with him.

The Eagle House was a fly-blown and extraordinarily dingy hotel patronised by travelling salesmen; the food was horrible but the atmosphere impeccably respectable. Frances was delighted with it. Never before had she felt so adult, so independent. She was sure that Mr. Petersen took her seriously, judged her upon her merits as an individual and not as a Defoe or as a young girl—not as a female at all. She liked him! She remembered what Minnie had said about him and rejected it all. "Common," "presumptuous," "thick-skinned"; snobbish nonsense, all that!

They walked back to the office and spent a very agreeable afternoon there. He explained the work to her, and was pleased by the quickness with which she grasped his explanations. He saw that she would soon be really very useful. She was not only intelligent and ambitious, but she had that remarkable feminine loyalty, that willingness to use all her powers in behalf of some one else, that is the curse and the glory of her sex. She never viewed Mr. Petersen as an ambitious young man would have done, as a stepping stone in her own career; she was genuinely concerned with how she could help Mr. Petersen with Mr. Petersen's business.

Five o'clock came very soon, she thought. Mr. Petersen looked at the clock and closed his desk.

"Closing time!" he said cheerfully, "I hope your first day in business hasn't——"

He stopped short because her face had changed so suddenly. She turned pale as he was speaking.

"Oh!" she said, with a gasp.

"What's the matter?" he asked, anxiously. "Are you ill?"

"No—only—I'd forgotten. . . . Is there a short cut?"

Even her fine courage faltered at the prospect of once more walking those five dusty miles; it really appalled her. Yet, with a quite empty pocketbook, what could she do?

"A short cut?" he repeated, puzzled. "But—you don't mean to say you expect to walk home?"

"I've got to!"

"Wait a bit! . . . I've a nice little trap in my stable. I'll be back in ten minutes to fetch you. No; I shan't listen to you. It's out of the question, walking back."

She was *so* relieved. She climbed into his nice little trap, behind his brisk little mare and they set off smartly. Of course, Mr. Petersen did look undeniably like a coachman, with his back like a ramrod and his red neck and his huge hands holding the reins so very correctly. . . . But what *does* it matter? "He's a gentleman, if there ever was one," she told herself. "He's a dear!"

They had not gone half the distance, when, whom should they meet but Minnie, in the ramshackle buggy, with the silly old horse. Her eyes were red and her expression uncertain.

"Frankie!" she cried, "I've been so worried! Come right in here!"

She smiled a wan greeting at Mr. Petersen.

"I didn't think she'd really do it," she said. "I thought she'd turn back. And when I realised that she'd really gone, all that long way—— You poor old Frankie!"

With her sister established by her side, she turned again to Mr. Petersen.

"Well!" she said. "We'll have to give in. And let her go. No matter how much we miss her."

Which gave him the impression that the objection to

Frankie's enterprise was solely one of sentiment. An impression altogether false, but then, he didn't really know any of the Defoes or their principles. It never occurred to him that it was disgraceful and shameful to work in his office.

He looked after the sisters with a kindliness which had now become almost affection, and he thought what a loving, unreasonable little soul Minnie was. Couldn't bear her sister out of her sight! A thorough woman, she was!

CHAPTER THREE

I

It was Frances who was usually considered the snob of the family, for Frances was imperious and inclined to be haughty, and had a sense of her personal dignity. But, as a matter of fact, she was as little snobbish as one so brought up could well be. She respected herself but she respected others. She was devilishly proud, but she permitted pride in others. She was capable of admiring worth wherever found and was quite honest about it. She really did not stand upon her Defoeanness. She had, it must be admitted, a fair share of young conceit; she believed herself to be handsome and intelligent and resolute, and these were her claims upon the world's regard. Whereas Minnie, far more humble as an individual, demanded a slavish servility from the majority of mankind simply because she was what she called a "gentlewoman." It entailed no obligations, required no effort. One was, or one wasn't. Like being born a sacred white bull. It was an involuntary sanctity which all right-minded people of the lower orders could instantly recognise.

Her grandmother thought as she did. Between them they ordained that Mr. Petersen did not exist, and they had tried in vain to convince Frankie of it. She had been very, very trying!

The two sisters drove on in a rather constrained silence after the bone of contention had gone. Minnie was absorbed in the management of the capricious skeleton, but

was still able to suggest a forgiveness that irritated Frances. And Frances couldn't quite stifle her remorse. She remembered dreadful things she had said to Minnie that morning. Things which had evidently made her weep.

All on account of Mr. Petersen; because he was so utterly unworthy of being served by one of the Brahmin caste. How vain their prayers and tears. She had suffered too much from that life without hope or sympathy. She knew that they could not comprehend her pain, and she could not endure attempting to explain. *She* knew that Mr. Petersen had saved her from despair.

She looked at Minnie's obstinate, tear-stained face, and was filled with a great regret and a sort of loneliness.

"Oh, Minnie!" she cried. "Do try to understand a little! Don't you see that I couldn't bear a life like this?"

"There's no use talking about it. Only, Frankie, don't imagine it hasn't been hard for me," she answered. "After all, I suppose I am a human being."

"I know it, darling, I'm awfully sorry for you!" Frances assured her contritely.

Minnie had a not very admirable trait of always pressing an advantage.

"In a way," she went on, "I feel it more. I was home so much more—with *him*."

Her eyes filled with tears; her thoughts flew back to that day, six weeks ago. . . .

II

She was sitting alone in the studio, copying a cast of a child's foot with great care. She had expressed a ladylike desire to "learn drawing" and her father had willingly consented, and arranged for private lessons, which she took in the afternoon, when the other girls had gone home. She was a bitter cross to her teacher,

for not only was she quite without aptitude, but she likewise had no taste and no spirit. She couldn't be fired. She wished to "learn drawing" simply; art and beauty had nothing to do with it. An artist, to Minnie, was a person who could so present things that you recognised them on paper. She was often pleased with her own drawings.

According to her habit, the young teacher had gone out of the room. Minnie was perfectly contented to be alone, to potter away with those exasperating fine little lines. She couldn't be taught, anyway; it was of no use even to criticise. She had accepted what was told her about tacking paper on a board, about the mechanical uses of charcoal and fixative and so forth, and after that wished to go ahead in her own way, simply drawing. Nothing more to it. She sat before her easel very straight and serious. She was really absorbed in her messy little drawing; she thought it was "sweet," and contemplated giving it to her father, nicely framed, as a Christmas present. He was sure to admire anything she did.

The big room was absolutely silent, peopled with ghostly white casts, heads, limbs, entire figures, lighted coldly from a skylight, so that she seemed in a world quite different from the brilliant autumn outside. Calm, quiet, satisfied, in the midst of an extraordinary peace—a peace which had surrounded her all her short years.

And which ended forever that day. She heard the footsteps of the teacher coming back along the corridor, more quickly than usual.

"Minnie, dear," she said, "Miss Leland wishes to see you."

This surprised Minnie mildly. With her usual docility she got up, put her charcoal in its little box, and hurried down the corridor, past all the rooms familiar to her

for nearly ten years, rooms all empty now, with rows and rows of chairs and desks, with their blackboards and charts and maps, well known to her and more or less dear. She had been graduated from the school a year ago, and was now, of course, beyond all that and superior to it, but she enjoyed coming back for these drawing lessons. She clung to familiar places.

Down the stairs, three flights, and to the comfortable little study of the principal. Minnie had no reproof to dread, she was and had always been beyond reproach in everything, a model girl. She tapped on the door and was bidden to enter.

As soon as she saw her cousin there, she knew something was wrong. A great dread came over her. She didn't look at Miss Leland at all.

"What is it, Cousin Ella?" she asked, sharply.

The forlorn spinster, who had years ago technically replaced their mother, suddenly burst into tears.

"My poor child!" she cried, "My poor child!"

She had come, trembling with dread and grief, prepared to "break" it to Minnie in a merciful way. But couldn't endure the sight of the unsuspecting orphan.

"Minnie!" she sobbed. "Your poor father——"

Minnie had turned very pale.

"Hurry up!" she cried. "Is he—dead?"

Cousin Ella told her in a confused and broken way. A cable had come to tell of his death from pneumonia in Liverpool, the very day he had landed.

"I came to you *at once*," she said. "The very instant I had read it."

That was her duty, of course. News of death must be spread without delay. She had driven off immediately to intercept Minnie, so that she should learn of it at least an hour sooner than if she had come home in the usual way.

Minnie was stunned and incredulous. Cousin Ella always got things mixed, anyway.

"Let's see the cable!" she demanded.

Cousin Ella answered, with a shade of resentment, that she hadn't brought it.

In a horrible nightmare daze, Minnie followed her to the carriage. It was not sorrow she felt, but dread; as if the catastrophe instead of having taken place already, were about to happen, were imminent. They drove along the familiar suburban roads, lined with charming houses, smooth lawns without fence or hedge, great trees, a domain prosperous, lovely and serene. They reached home, a grey stone house on a hill, planted with dwarf evergreens; they went in. Nothing in any way changed, the same well-ordered, comfortable dignity. It couldn't be true! Father *never* coming back?

She again demanded the cable, and obtained it.

*"Mr. Defoe died this morning. Pneumonia.
Seven o'clock. Writing. JOHNSON."*

So it wasn't a mistake. She looked round instinctively for support, for reassurance, in her terror.

"Oh, father!" she cried, in a sort of shriek. "Cousin Ella! Oh . . . *Do something!* Don't let it be!"

In that instant, the very essence of her father's soul was comprehended by her; she could realise him, all his fondness, his immeasurable indulgence for her. She saw what she had lost, and was overwhelmed. It was the end of her childhood, the last wholly genuine, wholly disinterested emotion she was ever to feel.

III

He had been a "business man," engaged in a very vague business—promoting schemes and so on. He had spent money lavishly on his adored daughters, and when

he was at home, in the intervals between mysterious trips, he liked to talk to them about their future, and ask them what they wanted him to do for them. Poor devil! Evidently he expected to live forever, for he had made no provision at all for them, not even life insurance. There was not a penny.

Frances had been at college just a month when she was recalled. The lawyer had gone out to break the news to her of her father's death and her own destitution, and it must be admitted that she had behaved very badly. At first she refused absolutely to come home. She said she *would* go on, no matter what happened; she'd work her way through college; lots of girls did. She had made up her mind to become a doctor, and she wasn't going to be stopped now, at the very start. The lawyer pointed out that as this plan demanded quite eight years of study, she might well spare a day or two now to attend to her poor sister. So she consented, though she felt in her heart that it was the end. She went, but she was markedly sullen.

Sober little Minnie, tired out with crying, reproved her.

"Can't you think of something else beside yourself, Frankie?" she asked.

Frankie was abashed. She had an unbounded admiration for Minnie's moral worth; the very fact of her being smaller, plainer and stupider than she was, was somehow proof of it. She really made an effort to look upon her ambition as selfish and petty and to concentrate her eager and vigorous mind solely on her father's death.

Minnie had no ambition to give up. She supposed that in the course of time she would marry, and that would suffice. She was not able to show much sympathy for her sister's intolerable disappointment.

"I know it's hard to leave college and all that," she said. "But after all, Frankie, I don't think you'd have stuck it out for eight years. You wouldn't have liked being a doctor, when the time came. Such a queer thing for a girl."

"Nonsense!" cried Frances, angrily, "you have the stupidest, most antiquated ideas!"

"I'll work my way through," she went on, "I'll be a waitress or something. But I *won't* give up!"

Minnie began to cry.

"Please, Frankie, stay with me a little while," she entreated. "I'm so lonely!"

Who could refuse?

IV

Cousin Ella advised them to accept the offer of their grandmother, their father's mother. She was the only living soul who wanted them, anyway.

Frankie protested.

"Brownsville Landing!" she cried. "Oh, Cousin Ella! It's the *worst* place!"

She remembered visits there in the summer holidays, the boredom of it, the ugliness. But Minnie assured her that it would only be temporary, while they looked about and made their plans. She brought forward the sensibleness of it, made Frances feel how rash and headstrong it would be not to go.

She had her way, as she always did. The house was closed, the furniture sold, the servants dismissed. After a curious fortnight in a boarding house nearby, where their friends came to say good-by, they went off, with all their effects in two modest trunks.

Early in the afternoon they reached Brownsville Landing.

Even grief could not blind them to the fact that they

were interesting figures—two young orphans. They were aware that every one of the idlers in the station knew who they were and where they were going. They followed Thomas Washington to the battered old surrey and sat down, perfectly decorous, without turning their heads, conscious nevertheless of being regarded with sympathy, with speculation.

They were tacitly agreed that it would not be correct to talk; in silence and concealing all trace of curiosity they went rattling off up Main Street and along the dusty five-mile road to the farm.

Their grandmother was waiting for them in terror. How to console them? Their loss seemed to her so terrible, so desolating. She could with truth say nothing better than—"You are utterly ruined and alone in the world, friendless and penniless." She watched the carriage coming, with the girls side by side, images of decent grief, perfectly restrained; then, when the carriage stopped, the restraint vanished, and they rushed into her arms, sobbing.

She led them into the darkened parlour, and sat down on the sofa between them, trying in a trembling voice to comfort them with religion and proverbs, inextricably mixed. But Frankie was not in any way to be quieted. She wept so violently, so passionately that the old lady could think of nothing better to do than to lead her upstairs and urge her to lie down.

"There! There!" she murmured. "What can Grandma do for you?"

She answered, in a muffled voice, her head buried in the pillows:

"Please—let me alone . . . a little while."

"I think we'd better," whispered Minnie, and they went out, carefully closing the door upon Frankie's weeping.

The first glimpse of the farm had overwhelmed her completely. She remembered the college, august, beautiful, with the orderly and purposeful life that so appealed to her, she thought of her old home, as it would look now, in the late afternoon sunshine, of its dignity and freedom, the hope she had known there. And then this, this shabby, forlorn old house standing alone in a weed-grown straggling garden, surrounded by the neglected fields, which stretched away to the cold and unknown blue hills. All that she hated most, solitude, stagnation, neglect.

v

The old lady turned with relief to Minnie, who was so much more amenable. She led her down into the kitchen where she had been cooking her choicest dishes for the orphans, gave her milk to drink and fresh cake to eat, and watched her with melancholy in which there was considerable satisfaction. So absolutely what it should be was Minnie's attitude. She was worn and tired, her eyes reddened with crying, all of which rendered so touching her pleasantness and politeness, her willingness to answer questions. A womanly little soul, altogether. The old lady fancied she saw in her the amiable and domestic creature desired by all old people, the consolation of her age; youth with none of youth's disadvantages, the sedateness, the responsibility of maturity with the vigour and charm proper to her twenty years. She acclaimed Minnie a paragon, a Phoenix among maidens.

Minnie herself began to feel comforted. The quiet kitchen in the last brightness of the Spring day, with the dinner pots and pans hissing on the stove and a pleasant fragrance of freshly baked bread and cake in the air, all the homeliness and friendly peace about her assuaged

her grief, strengthened her soul. Her thoughts began to turn to the future—she tried to imagine a possible life there.

“Do you still live here all alone, Grandma?” she asked.

The old lady sighed. Poor creature! When she allowed herself to think of it, she wondered how she succeeded in living at all.

Her husband had been one of those happy and lavish persons who obtain, Heaven knows how, a reputation for wealth. He had always had plenty of money to spend, and everything he or his family needed, but it was, unfortunately, a sort of Fortunatus’ purse, into which he could dip without limit, but which couldn’t be bequeathed, which for everyone else lay flat and empty.

At least he had insured his life, and his widow received a monthly income of twenty-five dollars from this—her sole income. An impossible situation. How she struggled along, no one knew, not even herself. Although struggle is not the word; she didn’t struggle; she simply went on existing, miraculously sustained by the forbearance of others. It was impossible to turn the poor creature out, rent or no rent, or to refuse her credit for food, in this town where she had lived for sixty years. She “managed.” When she couldn’t pay, she didn’t pay. Her quite simple rule was to give cash when compelled, and to commandeer the rest of her necessities. She didn’t worry very much over her debts. She had a phrase which satisfied her completely. “You can’t draw blood from a stone,” she would say.

Her son had sent her money now and then, but very little. He had not been a good son; ‘his father over again,’ she often reflected, ‘out of sight, out of mind.’ A present at Christmas time, or when the girls came to

visit. He never asked her how she managed, because he didn't want to know.

And here were the girls left as she had been left. . . . Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at Minnie.

"Yes, I've been a lonely old woman," she said, "but I hope I shan't be any more."

Minnie kissed her soberly.

"No, Grandma, dear," she said. "We won't leave you again."

"Where else could we go, anyway?" she added to herself, in her practical way.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

FRANCES had waked up early that first morning. She looked round the big, low-ceilinged room, at the pictures on the walls, sheep in a snowstorm, ships at sea, religious maidens, hung with a sole aim of covering up the most badly stained places in the faded paper, at the white iron wash stand, the lame chest of drawers on which stood a quite unrelated and unattached mirror, the dusty strips of old carpets serving as rugs, at all the dinginess and shabbiness and deserted old age, and in a sort of frenzy, she began to shake Minnie.

Minnie opened her black eyes.

"Well!" she said, sleepy but good-humoured.

"Minnie, isn't this *awful*!"

"The same as it always was," she replied, slowly, "and it seems to me we can be pretty useful here."

Frances frowned.

"To Grandma? Of course. . . . Only, isn't it senseless for two healthy young women to spend their time looking after one old lady?"

"I shouldn't call it senseless."

"I could help much more by earning money and sending it to her," said Frances.

"You don't have to decide all that *now*," Minnie returned, rather severely. "You can give yourself a week or so to rest—after what's happened."

Frankie said no more, but remained unconvinced. She made up her mind she *wouldn't* stay on that farm—not for a week.

Poor Frankie! Doomed to stay there for how many weeks!

She tried in vain to think of some means of getting away. At first there were a dozen radiant vistas, possibilities of all sorts. She contemplated becoming a secretary, a writer, a doctor's assistant, a teacher, or, as a last resort, the wife of an extraordinary man. It was a long time before she could realise of how little value she was, how undesired. She hadn't even money for her fare to New York, and her answers to advertisements found in the city papers were always late and never regarded. She was amazed to find herself in this blind alley: her eager hands groped for some sort of outlet; she couldn't believe that she was actually obliged to stay in Brownsville Landing.

It cannot be denied that she was a trial to the other two. She shirked her share of the housework and remained obstinately shut up in her room with her old school books. And every time they drove into the village she insisted upon stopping at the Carnegie Library and exchanging piles of books, keeping Minnie waiting an outrageous length of time. Minnie and her grandmother had each to take out cards so that she could get as many books as she could carry.

She used to cry, too, at night, and tell Minnie she couldn't *stand* it. Some days she was scornful and silent, scarcely saw them except at meal times; then remorse would seize her and the next day she wouldn't touch her books, but would work to the point of exhaustion cleaning the house. When she did bend her mind to such humble tasks she far surpassed Minnie. She was quick, thoroughgoing, altogether competent, and, when she wasn't cross, she was a delight to the others, gay, endearing, irresistible.

They couldn't understand, couldn't see how her ardent

spirit suffered. Her ambition, still so vague that she was not able to express it, was unintelligible to them. Sometimes she would confess to Minnie that she wanted to marry an explorer.

"Or someone like that. Someone awfully famous and yet not stuffy. Not anyone who sits down and works."

And perhaps that same day she would say vehemently that she didn't care a bit about getting married, ever. She wanted to be something on her own account. There wasn't much chance now that she could be a doctor, but there were plenty of other things, useful and interesting.

Minnie often asked to be informed of the object of all the studying her sister did.

"I don't know, exactly," Frances would tell her, "only it's some comfort to think I'm not slipping back."

II

Minnie fitted into that life as if she had been made for it. Serious, anxious, good-tempered, she followed her grandmother about, helping her, deeply interested in the daily work. She was not very clever or skilful, but she supplied the lack of these by a great willingness. She did not suffer from any passion for perfection; she was satisfied if she could "get through" what was essential.

She assumed responsibilities. She took it upon herself to get up first and get the breakfast. Frances used to watch her, springing out of bed in the half-darkness directly the alarm clock rang, and beginning to dress without wasting time even to stretch.

And not only was she invaluable within doors, but almost at once she had taken charge of the decrepit old mare lingering on in a filthy old barn. This had formerly been Thomas Washington's duty, but Minnie assured her grandmother that this arrangement was ex-

travagant and that Thomas was rough. In a very few days she had learned from him all the essentials in the care of Bess, and herself assumed the work.

She had a passionate, an exaggerated love for animals; compassion rather than love; for every dumb creature she saw she felt a distressing pity and, of course, being Minnie, an anxious sense of responsibility. She was forever worried by the thought that some beast was being ill-used. She even went so far as to follow carters to make sure they weren't cruel. She had repeated disagreements with her grandmother because the old lady wouldn't allow Michael to usurp her chair.

Michael and the other cats had at once become her special property. She put them into the cellar at night and first thing in the morning would unbolt the door and let them out, welcoming them with a smile maternal and solicitous. They were always waiting near the door, and would come jostling in at once, uttering impatient little cries, and looking up at her with luminous and plaintive eyes. She would bend over the worn and unlovely Spotty, mother of uncounted drowned kittens, with kindly sympathy; her young son Teddy, who was still silly and charming, she treated with indulgence; but for old Michael she had a manner at once motherly and propitiating. Michael, truculent old blackguard, his thick, short coat striped like a tiger, arrogant and complacent as an old pirate chief! *He* never showed any affection, but a sort of shameless allegiance, knowing that from her came all his benefits. She was really very happy in this life. . . .

III

Providence was always on Minnie's side, and Providence, it would seem, was set firmly against Frankie's worldly ambition to leave Brownsville Landing.

The poor old lady fell ill; not at all suddenly, simply one day she asked Minnie to stop at the doctor's on her way home from the village and, if possible, fetch him with her. He came, and remained shut up with the old lady a long time. When he came out of her room, he saw neither of the girls; he had to waste his valuable time seeking them. Minnie he discovered at last in the barn, preparing the old horse for her journey back with him, and she was so concerned about this, so insistent that the doctor should perfectly understand Bess's delicacy and nervousness, that she forgot to ask about her grandmother.

"She won't pass a milk waggon," she explained. "You'll have to get out and lead her by if you happen to meet one. She's . . ."

"I'll look after your horse," said the doctor. "It's only a matter of six miles. I'll send my man back with her as soon as he's back from the blacksmith's with my own. And now that your mind's easy on that score, perhaps you'll be interested to hear that your grandmother's in a bad state."

"Oh, what's the matter!" she cried.

"We'll bring her round; don't worry," he replied evasively, "but it won't be in a week, or in a month. She needs care and nursing. And you'll have to see that she doesn't go down the stairs," he added. "She's not to leave that floor for the present."

Minnie stopped long enough to see how he handled Bess, over that awful rut near the gate; then she flew upstairs.

"Grandma!" she entreated, "do tell me what's wrong!"

But the old lady refused to discuss it.

"Don't fret, child," she said. "I'll do very well."

"But it worries me so dreadfully not to know."

The old lady remained firm. Some obscure sense of

pride informed her that it was not fitting and proper to discuss the physical body with one's grandchild. She would only admit that her heart was not as strong as it might be. . . .

She didn't seem particularly ill; she sat propped up in bed, knitting, quite cheerful. It did not occur to Minnie that the poor old thing was worn out, that the organism which had worked without ceasing for seventy-five years was in need of rest—eternal rest.

She knocked vigorously on the bedroom door, which Frances insisted upon keeping locked. Frances let her in with a very bad grace, which she ignored.

"*Now!*" she said. "Now, we're in for it. Poor Grandma's sick and the doctor won't allow her to go downstairs for months."

They discussed it soberly, Frankie lying flat on the bed, her hands under her head, Minnie sitting beside her.

"We'll simply have to do the best we can," said Minnie.

Frances agreed.

"It's dreadful for her," she said, "when she's always been so active."

IV

Minnie at once instituted a new régime, under which her grandmother received the best possible care. She waited on her devotedly, spent all her scant leisure with her; was, as usual, faultless.

At least, that was how she appeared to her sister. Frankie honestly could not see a fault in her. Except that she was sometimes a bit too diplomatic, too anxious to keep things pleasant. That is, she didn't always tell the truth—exactly. . . . She was not at all abashed if she were found out; she had always the same reply.

"I thought it was for the best."

The long, long days went by, all alike. At five o'clock the alarm clock rang. Minnie jumped up and closed the window, and lighted the lamp on the bureau while Frances, pretending to be asleep, lay watching her. The lamp-light made a little bright spot in the big shadowy room, showing Minnie like an actress in the spotlight, only quite without self-consciousness, dressing herself quickly, wishing only to be neat.

"I wish I weren't a bit vain," she would reflect. "Minnie's so wonderful!"

Then Minnie would go groping her way along the black corridor, stopping always outside the old lady's door to listen to her breathing, and, after that, there was always a long interval of silence, before she could be heard, coming up the stairs, slowly and carefully, with the tray.

She always opened the door of the darkened room quietly, so that she shouldn't startle her grandmother, in spite of the fact that she invariably found the old lady wide awake. Then she went at once about the hated business of admitting a little light into the room with as little fresh air as possible. She had first to pull up the shade, which never would roll properly but had to be jerked up and down a number of times, then to unlock the window and prop it up with a stick while she struggled with the rusty catches and flung open the shutters. She set the tray by the bedside with the unvarying question:

"How are you this morning, Grandma?" with a sort of professional cheerfulness. "Did you have a good night?"

"Very poor, my dear," the old lady would usually reply.

Minnie would say that she was *very* sorry, and after

asking if there were anything else needed, would go on her way, not really at all sorry or disturbed. She had no idea what a "poor night" meant; she had never experienced one, never tried to imagine one. All her grandmother's ailments were remote, vague and without interest for her. Her sole concern was to do her duty.

This done, she proceeded to wake Frances, and while she was dressing, got ready their own breakfast in the kitchen. Frances usually found her preparing an economical mixture of condensed milk and water for the cats, with old Michael standing at her side, looking up into her face, his pink mouth opening in a silent cry. The milk properly warmed, each animal bent its sleek little head over its familiar saucer, lapping steadily; now and then Michael looked up, licked his chops and seemed about to speak, then thought better of it and went on drinking.

Minnie was not good company at breakfast time; she was too much preoccupied with plans for the day. She had the obnoxious air of a very busy person trying to be polite. Immediately she had finished she hurried off to the stable, or to the cottage of Thomas Washington across the road, or about some other of her varied undertakings.

Thomas Washington was a highly respectable Negro who had begun life as "hired man" for their grandfather, but who had got on very well and was now a small farmer on his own account. He was always willing to assist Minnie with expert advice, but nothing further, unless it were to be suitably recompensed. Thrift had made him independent and comfortable; thrift he worshipped and practised, and it forbade him to do anything for nothing. The gratitude of a penniless Defoe was of no value to him, he didn't care for it. Nevertheless he was of the greatest use to Minnie, because he

knew how to do everything and she being so very "handy" was able to learn from his explanations. From the bedroom window Frances used to see her talking to him over his gate, or watching him as he illustrated some point of carpentry with grave gestures, and come tramping home again, in her shapeless old hat and a big apron, to work with noble cheerfulness.

Not for anything on earth would she have admitted that this cheerfulness was genuine, that it sprang from her satisfaction at finding work within her power, for the first time. At school, at home with Frances, she had, in spite of her naïve conceit, always been more or less conscious of inferiority, of being surpassed. Resolutely she covered this new satisfaction with a veil of martyrdom, made it a sort of reproach. She would never, never admit enjoying anything. Perhaps at the bottom of her queer little soul she was aware that the things she truly enjoyed were not altogether admirable—perhaps her spirit was appalled before her mind. Provided, of course, that she possessed a spirit.

Mysteries forever unsolvable, these greedy, hypocritical, obtuse little beings. Stupid, without sympathy, they none the less leave their impress on the whole world. They force us to believe that their blind and ruinous maternal passion—a perverted instinct—is a sacred and mystic thing; they hold up to us their animal jealousy of one man as "love"; complacently they reveal this little beast, which one loves with rage and disgust, and cannot resist, and they call it Woman. And perhaps it is. Perhaps those others, with hearts, with brains, with souls, are not true women, only the freaks of nature. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

I

MINNIE turned in at the gate, or rather, the gate posts, for there had been no gates for years.

"I got a cold supper ready before I left," she said. "Everything's on the table. Don't wait for me, Frankie; you must be terribly tired and hungry."

Frances was touched.

"Minnie!" she said, "Really, you're an angel!"

Minnie smiled indulgently.

"Silly old Frankie!" she said.

Indulgence was all that Frankie could obtain. In vain she talked of the good she could do them, of how she would be able to help them as she got on better, of the value of the experience to be gained in Mr. Petersen's office. Minnie and her grandmother persisted in regarding this work of hers as a rather selfish frivolity; they humoured her, but they were grieved. Frankie was made to see that Minnie had chosen the better and the harder part, that she at least held inexorably to duty. They passed an evening not at all pleasant. The gulf between them was becoming more and more evident. Things were never quite the same again, after that first day at Mr. Petersen's.

II

Unknown to the old lady, who would have been deeply shocked, Frankie and Minnie were in the parlour the next Sunday afternoon sewing, putting the final touches to a dress which Frankie was to wear in the

office next day. When, suddenly, as she happened to look up, Minnie saw Mr. Petersen riding up the drive, on his splendid horse, and wearing his breeches and leggins and a quite new coat.

"Frankie!" she cried, in horror. "He's coming in! Hide the sewing, quick!"

"He wouldn't care," Frankie objected, but nevertheless she obeyed, and every trace of their activity had vanished by the time Minnie admitted him.

"Might I see Mrs. Defoe?" he asked.

Minnie explained that she wasn't able to come downstairs.

"So I've heard. But it's a business matter. Perhaps she'd let me go up."

She did; they watched him mounting the stairs, which creaked and shook under his heavy tread.

"What can he want?" asked Frances, nervously. "Oh, Minnie, I hope and pray it's nothing about my not going on!"

"I don't see what else it can be," said Minnie, consolingly.

But she was soon enlightened. Mr. Petersen came tramping down again after twenty minutes' talk and announced that Mrs. Defoe would like to see Miss Minnie.

The old lady was rather agitated.

"Dear! Dear!" she whispered. "The man's arranged a second mortgage on the east field, so that I can pay off part of that first mortgage Mr. Bascom is so rude about. I don't understand it very well, but I must say he's very considerate—very considerate. Dear me! You'll have to be civil to him, pet. Ask him to sit down and give him a piece of the fruit cake."

She found him standing in the hall, talking to Frankie, and when she invited him into the parlour, he accepted cheerfully.

"Get Mr. Petersen a piece of cake, Frankie," said Minnie. She *couldn't* bring herself to wait on him.

He was polite, he was clean and well-dressed, he said nothing that could offend her, and yet she *was* grossly offended, merely by the sight of him, sitting there, in the Defoe parlour, holding his straw hat in his great red hands. Couldn't he realise?

The fact of his being a Swede was enough. She had a very vague idea where and what Sweden was, knew nothing at all about its people, its history, its music, its literature. She considered all Scandinavians "low." There was no appeal from that.

Unconscious of his lowness, Mr. Petersen talked on pleasantly, told them what was going on in the town, and all the bits of news he thought they might like to hear. He was actuated by a great good-will toward both of the girls, and a peculiar interest in Minnie. He had thought of her often since that first meeting.

He stopped a long time. When he had gone, Frankie began to laugh.

"Minnie!" she cried. "Did you notice? He really looks awfully like old Michael."

Minnie refused to smile.

"I think he's a horrid, presumptuous man," she said "I call it a shame that we have to put up with him."

"Nonsense," Frankie interrupted her, "it's he who puts up with us. A darn good thing for us he does! I *like* him!"

Minnie was destined to see him often. As the old lady had requested, with great dignity, he called regularly every month and was conducted upstairs. She felt pretty sure that he didn't get his rent, all of it, at any rate, but it didn't affect him. He was as kind, as cheerful as ever, and always willing to make any repairs that were needed.

It didn't occur to her for some time that she was the

object of "attentions" on his part. She knew that he liked to chat with her, and now and then he brought her fruit from his garden. But she didn't think, she couldn't think, that he "meant anything." With the gulf there was between a Defoe and a Petersen!

It was Frankie who first mentioned it.

"Do you know," she said, "I think Mr. Petersen's gone on you, Minnie."

"Don't be so vulgar!" Minnie reproved her.

"He's always asking about you," Frankie went on. "Oh, he *is*, Minnie, I know it!"

Quite true; he was. He saw Frankie every day, and was yet proof against her beauty and her happy courage; his heart never beat the quicker for her. He liked her very much, and respected her, and was courteous and kind and friendly toward her, but she had no appeal for him. In Minnie he saw every quality he most admired in a woman. He was happy to sit and look at her, always with an apron on, going about her business in her terribly serious way. He thought her kind, gentle and sympathetic, he thought her thrifty and capable, he admired her fine dark eyes and her matronly figure. He even fancied that she was peculiarly intelligent, because she always listened attentively to him, and was so silent, so mysterious herself. He noticed, too, how her grandmother doted on her, and how Frances looked up to her. He was, in his cautious way, always studying her, until he thought he understood her. While, as a matter of fact, he misunderstood her completely, in every way, like the others.

She was the quietest and the stupidest person in the house, and she ruled both the others; she was the least scrupulous, and they exalted her "goodness"; she did nothing well, and continually they praised her for her wonderful housekeeping. Enigma; extraordinary Minnie,

quintessence of womanliness—in Heaven's name, who is to sit in judgment on you?

III

In the autumn the old lady was permitted to go downstairs once a day, and on the first of these occasions, Mr. Petersen came with a gift of fruit which he had bought in New York. Frances had told him of the old lady's improvement and he wanted, so he said, to congratulate her. He came as usual on his horse, and Mrs. Defoe, who was sitting by the parlour window, was the first to see him. She frowned.

"Silly nonsense!" she said, half aloud. "A carpenter, capering round the country like a fine gentleman!"

(A carpenter she had decided to consider him.)

He came in; his face and hands looked redder than ever, and he was frankly wiping his forehead with a huge handkerchief.

"Well!" he said cheerfully, "I'm very glad to see you so much better, Mrs. Defoe."

"Thank you, Mr. Petersen," she replied, demurely.

"We're likely to have a mild winter, I believe," he went on, "from all indications——"

He rose as Minnie came in, grave, like one interrupted in the midst of important work, but mindful of the duties of hospitality.

"I was saying," he resumed, in his singing drawl, "I think we'll have a fine, mild winter. I was working in my garden on Sunday——"

"On *Sunday*!" cried the old lady.

"That's the only day I have time," he explained.

"But—— Well, I have my little notions. . . . Very old-fashioned, I dare say. . . . You're not a member of Our church, Mr. Petersen? I don't remember ever having seen you there."

He shook his head.

"A Lutheran?"

"No."

"A—*Catholic*?"

"I am a Freethinker," he said gravely.

This was the final straw; Minnie and the old lady stared at him in open disapproval.

"I think maybe on the other side we are not so—religious," he said.

Mrs. Defoe had long been convinced of that, as she was of their immorality in general, but she was genuinely shocked that, under her roof, in the very room where the minister had sat not a week ago, in the very presence of her Bible and her prayer books, he should openly and without shame proclaim himself a Freethinker! Neither he nor Minnie had any idea what that word implied for her, with what horror and repulsion she had heard her husband speak of Tom Paine. She made some sort of excuse and, supported by Minnie, disappeared into the kitchen.

"I'll sit here," she whispered, "until that man's gone."

Mr. Petersen remained, happy and undisturbed, talking on and on, while Minnie listened with her usual polite attention, giving no hint of her burning anxiety to get on with her work. She scarcely heard a word; no matter what he was saying, she was thinking, "Oh, dear! Eleven o'clock and Grandma's bed isn't made yet!" That was of so much more importance and interest than anything he could say.

He went away, imagining that he had ingratiated himself with them both, by his present of fruit, and by his agreeable conversation; he didn't suspect that there was now another and still blacker mark against him.

He had only one friend in that household, and that was Frances. Before she had been working a week in

his office, she realised something of his quality and as time went on she grew enthusiastic.

"He's a fine man," she told her sister. "He'd make a wonderful husband. He has the disposition of an angel, really. He's so honest, too. Everyone respects him."

"I wouldn't marry him if I were starving," said Minnie, "that common, vulgar carpenter!"

"He's not common and he's not vulgar and he's *not* a carpenter. I wish you could see his house."

"I never shall," said Minnie.

Frances often went there to fetch books for him when he was busy in his office. He lived in the town, in a solid old brick house which he had remodelled and greatly improved, with a respectable Swede and his wife to attend to his wants. Everything very orderly, very simple, very comfortable, a hundred times more civilised than the Defoe home. He had his garden, which gave him a great deal of pleasure, and an excellent little library of Scandinavian and English books, law books, novels, plays, a number of books on Socialism and economics. He read a great deal, in a laborious sort of way, slowly going through page after page and taking the ideas into his own head, to be examined there. His chief interest was Socialism; he could be—and often was—quite eloquent on that topic.

He was rather lonely in Brownsville Landing. He had found no one who was interested in his kind of Socialism, which was something more than discontent and jealousy; he found no one who had read what he had read on the subject; he was not able to interest himself in pool or poker, the popular recreations. Without being unduly vain, he believed himself to be considerably superior to the average inhabitant of the village. Even to the Defoes, as far as intellect and experience were

concerned. He actually thought that he might be a good match for Minnie.

Frances thought so too. She read his books with more and more respect and liked to hear him talk. She insisted upon quoting him to Minnie. She liked his plain and fine manner of living, she honoured his virtues.

"Minnie, you're an idiot," she said, bluntly. "You couldn't do better. If you'd come out of the middle ages and really *look* at him——"

"I don't pretend to be a modern woman," said Minnie, virtuously.

CHAPTER SIX

I

A YEAR and a half went by, and nothing changed. Minnie was the same serious little drudge, Frankie went on with her work in Mr. Petersen's office; he too was quite the same. The old lady was uncomplainingly busy. And the "affair," also, between Minnie and Mr. Petersen had progressed not at all. Minnie had so willed it; she knew quite well how to check her very prudent suitor.

Everything was going just as she wished. She was used now to Frankie's being away all day; she rather liked it, it gave her a freer hand. She thought of nothing but the daily routine and never tired of it. She would sit with her grandmother and discuss for hours the advisability and the possibility of a new preserving kettle, or whether they should send the rags to be woven into a rug, or whether Thomas Washington had been unfair about the tomatoes. She liked to tell Frankie that she worried about the future, but she really never did. She was remarkably contented. No great effort was required of her; she wasn't expected to read, or to keep up-to-date; even to trouble about clothes. She could work along in a sort of pleasant daze, just as she wished, praised by everyone for whatever she did, her numerous omissions and failures unknown. The animals were an unfailing happiness to her; she had her grandmother to talk to, and Frankie in the evening, and there was always the gratifying sense of Mr. Petersen's admira-

tion in the background. Everything going so smoothly, so beautifully, until once more Frankie spoiled it all.

She came home one evening in a fever of excitement. The librarian in the Carnegie Branch—a nice, jolly girl who extolled Mr. Petersen and liked Frankie—had told her of a position in New York.

“She was offered it, but it wouldn’t suit her, so she recommended me. She says she’s sure I could fill it. Wasn’t it nice of her?”

Minnie said nothing.

“It’s an authoress; she wants a secretary. She doesn’t care so much about experience or training, but she wants someone presentable—of good family.”

That was emphasised to appease Minnie.

“It’s thirty dollars a month, free and clear. I’d send you *half*.”

Minnie looked coldly at her.

“I suppose you’d be only too glad to go,” she said.

“Of course not,” said Frankie, and dropped the subject for the time. Only in her heart longed and longed for that wonderful job, that new, entrancing life in the city.

Of course she got it. That goes without saying. She was twenty-two, and passionately desirous. Of course she got it! But after what a struggle!

At first she renounced the plan utterly. It was selfish. She went to bed, lay by Minnie’s side, weeping quietly for a long time in the dark, longing and longing. Then she grew desperate. She *must* go! She couldn’t give up such an opportunity. The next day she wrote to the authoress and presently had a letter asking her to call. So she was obliged to tell them.

There was a dreadful scene. They even wept. She was amazed by her own ruthless firmness; she had never imagined she could so trample on these two beloved crea-

tures. She tried, poor girl, to explain something of her own fiery restlessness and vigour, her need for more life. But to no purpose; they saw nothing but her wish and determination to leave them. She ended, as one usually does, by losing her temper, and shut herself in the bedroom, trembling with anger.

"Do they expect me to bury myself here?" she thought, "Just to stop here, forever and ever? It's all very well for Grandma, *she's* seventy-five, and it's all right for Minnie. A little old maid like her! But *me*—— I won't!"

She temporised, fully resolved to hurt them *this once*, and then to load them with benefits, when her wonderful future should begin.

Daylight faded; the old room grew quite dark, the pallid yellow in the west turned grey, then inky. Her lamp was downstairs, and not for anything would she have gone after it. She drew a rocking chair up to the window and sat there looking out over the melancholy wide fields stretching to the mountains. One of those immeasurably solemn and majestic moods came over her: the night breeze blew on her face, sighing through the pine trees; her spirit was not on earth. High resolves, divine unselfishness, fired her; she wanted to help everyone, not only Minnie and her grandmother, but every single human soul. She felt urged to a mighty destiny. . . .

Then the mood ebbed, and left her chilled and lonely. She could hear Minnie in the kitchen directly beneath her; her pleasant voice talking to Michael; sometimes a cough from the old lady. Like a knife her love pierced her, love for everything safe, familiar and homely.

In another minute she would have rushed down the stairs to fling her arms round her sister, to tell her she would not, could not, ever leave her. But at that moment

the door opened and Minnie entered, lamp in hand; her eyes were red, her plain face rather pale.

"Frankie," she said, and setting down the lamp, caught her sister in a tight embrace.

"Frankie," she went on, "I've been talking it over with Grandma. . . . And we're both willing—for you to go——"

She could keep her tears back no longer; they wept together on each other's shoulders.

Minnie was the first to look up and dry her eyes.

"Now come downstairs, dear," she said, "I've made delicious cornmeal gems for your supper."

II

It was a bitter loss to Minnie. She drove Frankie to the station that last day with her heart like lead. And though she had voluntarily let her go, and said good-by to her steadily and cheerfully, her very real affection for her sister was hurt beyond remedy. She never again felt quite the same toward her, never lost that faint resentment; always remembered that Frances had wanted to go off and leave her, alone and lonely.

The house was dreadful when she re-entered it. She cried all day as she did her work, and went to sleep in miserable solitude. Oh, but she missed Frankie, the brilliant, the lovely, the ardent! And the more she missed her, the more deeply did she feel the wrong Frankie had done her.

Life had become unsupportable. She thought all the time of some way in which she could change it, a way which should, of course, satisfy her conscience.

For Minnie's was a conscience which imperiously required satisfaction. She had always to feel sure that she was "doing right." However, as she was always cer-

tain that all her aims were beyond reproach, her conscience never refused to sanction whatever means she employed in arriving at them.

She was more than a Jesuit. She did not so much believe that bad means were justified by a worthy end; she was simply convinced that no means used by her were, or could possibly be, bad.

Remorse and regret were unknown to her. And defeat, too, she had not as yet encountered. From her earliest years she had known how to get her own way. Either a serious manner made any request seem reasonable, or, if this failed, thoughtful consideration had always showed her a way to victory.

And yet, for all her crookedness and her muddle-headedness, and her fierce and ridiculous ruthlessness, wasn't there something about Minnie that was really sublime? When you look at her whole life, in all its preposterousness, can you really say whether or not she was good? Or bad? Or perhaps was not either good or bad, but elemental and innocent, even in harm, like a force of nature?

She bent her mind now upon her problem, surveyed her situation from every angle. Useless to deny that she considered Mr. Petersen. She turned him over and over in her mind, and, not without deep study, rejected him. He absolutely would not do. She couldn't be Mrs. Petersen. Although he had never asked her, never mentioned the subject at all.

She was quite determined to marry someone, though, and to marry soon. She couldn't see any other end to her miseries and her loneliness. She realised that under the present circumstances she was not at all likely to meet anyone marriageable; she could not, like Frankie, roam the world to find a man; she had to use more subtle and more difficult means. And, actually, alone

and unaided, the indomitable little thing thought of a way——

III

It was difficult to find a pretext for getting into the village that day. It was not her regular day, nothing was really needed, and no mail expected. Her grandmother was a little annoyed at such obstinacy.

"I can't *see*," she protested, "why on earth you want to go gadding off again to-day, with so much to be done."

"I've seen to everything," Minnie answered, and it was true.

"You'll have to go in on Saturday," the old lady reminded her.

"I *need* the wire," said Minnie, calmly. (Chicken wire being the pretext.)

The old lady argued that she could wait. Minnie wished to know what was to be gained by waiting: she had any number of excellent reasons for not waiting. In the end she went out to harness Bess, with secret triumph, knowing that she had disarmed all her grandmother's suspicions, and wouldn't need to make explanations when she returned home.

She drove off in the buggy, sitting very straight, with a full sense of her dignity as a young lady of fine old family. It never occurred to her that she was in the least ridiculous. She was not physically vain, but she did consider herself impressive, aristocratic, and it would have been a cruel shock to her to know that the cultured spinster, Miss Vanderhof, used to laugh when she saw her driving by, and say to her mother, "There goes Miss Quixote!"

Penniless and proud Minnie was, but farther than that the simile would not hold. No one less likely than

she to tilt against windmills, no one less sympathetic toward a lost cause.

She was engrossed in the management of the silly old horse, scanning the road for anything that might disturb its absurd old nerves, sternly resolved that it shouldn't over-exert itself. She was convinced that she had a most high-strung, mettlesome animal to handle.

At last she reached the village and drove regally along the Main Street, bowing right and left to the tradespeople, almost all of them her grandmother's creditors.

She stopped in front of the up-to-date office building, leaving Bess in charge of a reliable little boy in spectacles, personally known to her, then she climbed the stairs and knocked on Mr. Petersen's door.

He was delighted to see her, drew forward a chair and sat down opposite her with a pleasant smile.

"It's something new to see you here," he said. "The first time, isn't it?"

Minnie said it was.

"I hope you don't mind," she said appealingly, hesitatingly, "I know I shouldn't take up your time, but—I don't know anyone else I could possibly ask——"

"I'm only too happy," he assured her. "What can I do?"

"Your advice," she said. "I—things aren't going—very well. . . . I wanted to put this in a New York paper. But I didn't know which was the best, the most—respectable. If you think it's . . . Would you just please look at it?"

She had taken a piece of paper from her shabby little purse and now handed it to him. He read it, read it again, and his face grew scarlet.

"Young gentleman would receive board and practical instruction in farming in refined fam-

ily. Beautiful location. Moderate terms. Apply X——"

"But——" he faltered, "I don't . . . do you mean . . . you would teach farming, Miss Minnie?"

"Yes," she said, calmly. "I could always ask Thomas Washington about things I didn't know, when they came up. His truck farm is quite a model, you know."

Mr. Petersen was suffering horribly; he felt that he could *not* keep a straight face much longer.

"But—you see . . ." he said. "People don't do that much—in these days. There are—you know—any number of agricultural colleges——"

"Yes," said Minnie, scornfully. "That's all very well. But practical experience is what anyone needs. You can't learn farming out of books."

Mr. Petersen tried to convince her that students at agricultural colleges didn't occupy themselves exclusively with books, but he failed. She plainly considered all such institutions ridiculous and unpractical. He did convince her, however, that other people would very likely have the same silly notions as he had, and that it would be difficult, to say the least, for her to secure a pupil.

"Then suppose I simply advertise for a boarder?" she said.

Mr. Petersen was silent for some time, torn between a desire to placate Minnie, and a strong dislike for making a fool of himself. Suppose she were able to say afterward, "Well, you didn't say anything against it. I consulted you!" No! He couldn't; he had to be honest.

"The trouble is, nowadays people expect so much," he said, with a distressed frown. "All sorts of conveniences. Bathroom, hot water, gas or electricity. I don't believe—unless of course you were willing to make

very low terms—and in that case you wouldn't attract the sort of person you'd care to have in the house."

"I'd have to take what I could get," said Minnie.

Their points of view were so astonishingly different. Mr. Petersen wished to convey politely to her the idea that no sane person would dream of coming to board in a desolate old farm without even the classic advantages of fresh milk and "scenery." And Minnie wondered that he couldn't see the extraordinary and fascinating results which might follow the introduction of a strange man into their household. He might be an old man, who would naturally die and leave her all his money, or a young one who would marry her. She even thought, with irrational delight, of the possibility of an artist, or a poet. . . . Why wouldn't the man understand that she didn't care whether or not she made money from the venture? The essential thing was, that *something should happen*.

"And with the winter coming on," said Mr. Petersen.

"I should think," said Minnie, stiffly, "that there'd be plenty of people who would enjoy a nice, old-fashioned country winter."

"An old person," she added. "He might enjoy Grandpa's library."

This was absolutely too much for Mr. Petersen. He could no longer restrain himself; he burst into a tremendous laugh. He had a vision of a wretched old man, shivering in their frigid parlour, absorbed in that desolating accumulation of old hymn books, old volumes of sermons, bound volumes of long dead and forgotten magazines, and sickly old novels. By the time he had controlled his mirth, he had mortally and eternally offended Minnie. She rose.

"Thank you very much," she said, with a polite smile.

"It's very good of you to advise me. I'll think over all you've said."

"Just a minute!" he cried in alarm. "Please! . . . Miss Minnie . . . if it's a question of—earning a—little pocket money—why don't you consider a position in an office?"

A long silence.

"In my office, for instance? If you'd like your sister's place——"

"No, thank you; I couldn't leave Grandma," she answered.

And went out, burning with resentment against him. He knew it; as she drove off he watched her from the window with a sigh of regret. Her pitiful ignorance, her enterprise, her obstinacy, touched him profoundly. His heart positively ached for her.

Alas, Mr. Petersen! By reason of his compassion, forever lost!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

BEHOLD Minnie, a week or so later, harnessing Bess, this time for a mission authorised and altogether blameless. She was going to the station to meet Frankie, who was coming home for a week-end.

For days she and her grandmother had been making preparations, partly from an affectionate wish to please Frankie, and partly from a desire to impress her with their own importance and progressiveness. They had both an unspoken but perfectly understood feeling that it would be intolerable for her to say or to think that everything was unchanged since she had left. The old lady was specially proud of a pile of copies of a weekly magazine which she had audaciously subscribed for, seduced by a nice young agent.

As for Minnie, she had something up her sleeve which she *knew* would astonish and amaze, and utterly kill any news Frankie might bring. She whistled as she worked in the stable with a slightly malicious delight in anticipating the shock. Although she was terribly nervous, too. She had not yet had occasion to try her strength, and she was afraid that they—the practical, experienced wage-earning Frankie, and the quite incomprehensible old lady, might crush her. She was bound and determined to win, but she wasn't altogether sure. . . .

She drove off in her usual majestic fashion, agreeably conscious of a new hat. In order that she might compete upon equal terms with Frankie, her grandmother

had presented it to her, bought with money withheld from Heaven knows how many creditors. A triumphal progress through the town, and she came up the gravel drive to the station with something faintly resembling a trot. There, however, she was forced to descend, and hold the old mare by the bridle, patting her nose, trying with intense seriousness to soothe her. She couldn't bear to see her start and tremble, with that distressing rolling of her brown eyes, at the first sound of the engine's whistle. She had suggested that Frances should walk as far as the drug-store, so that Bess could wait there, out of sight of the trains that so disturbed her, but Frances wrote back with some spirit that she did not intend to lug a heavy bag four blocks for the sake of a silly old horse. She threatened to hire a hack, and rather than suffer that affront to the Defoe pride, Minnie was ready to make great concessions.

She was too much taken up with the horse to see her sister at first, and Frances had an oddly illuminating view of her, an impersonal view. It seemed to her that she had never before looked at Minnie without Minnie's looking back at her; this was not the Minnie familiar to her as her own reflection in the glass, but a stranger, a solemn, swarthy little woman, very countrified, inclined to plumpness, looking older than her years. She felt terribly sorry for her, hurried to her in affectionate remorse for having so seen her.

Minnie greeted her with her very agreeable smile.

"Frankie, you look splendid!" she said warmly.

So she did. She had a new tweed suit and a quite plain hat, correct, well-chosen things that suited her tall strong figure and permitted attention to fly at once to her gay, brilliant face. Oh, there was some foundation for the Defoe pride! Minnie, in her mind, saluted her sister as a princess, the vindication of the family. She

felt not the slightest envy; that was not one of her faults. Or was it that she was too well satisfied with her own quite different allure?

They drove through the Main Street again and past the up-to-date brick building, and, as she hoped, Frances asked her:

"How's old Petersen these days?"

"All right," Minnie answered, and was able to tell her several quite satisfactory things he had said on his last visit. He was a poor enough swain, but he was better than none, and the lovely Frankie had none! She listened with interest.

"I'm sure he *means something!*" she said.

Minnie admitted that she thought so too.

"But of course I don't encourage him," she said.

"Imagine his even thinking of such a thing—a man of his class!"

"That's all nonsense," said Frances, bluntly. "I think he's splendid. And he's well read and intelligent—— If you like him——"

"Well, I don't. Anyway, I've got other plans," said Minnie. "I'll tell you after supper."

Frances didn't ask what these plans were, didn't show any special interest in them, never for an instant suspected their radical and disturbing character. She did not even notice that Minnie was unusually preoccupied.

She hastened into the house to embrace her grandmother and to make and answer all the traditional enquiries; then looked about her with a peculiar emotion that was almost pain. She loved the old place, in a way; looked toward it while absent as her home and sure refuge, dreamed of it often with longing, but with devout thankfulness that she was no longer imprisoned in it. The memory of the two years she had suffered there was ineradicable.

Minnie and her grandmother seemed to her pitiful, small and shabby. She wanted ardently to help them and to change and improve them. She tried to keep this benevolence out of her manner, but it was always there, and they felt it.

She told them that she hoped soon to be able to send money home regularly.

"I'm going to study shorthand," she told them, "and then I'll be able to earn much more."

She saw their faces, unconvinced, not even much interested, and her enthusiasm waned. She would have to prove her good intentions to them.

II

Supper was over, and the dishes washed and put away. It was rather later than usual, on account of Frankie's talkativeness, and the old lady announced that she was going "right straight to bed." To her great surprise, Minnie stopped her.

"Please, Grandma," she said, "I want to talk to you for a minute. Frankie too. Please come into the parlour."

They followed her and waited while she lighted the blue china lamp on the centre table; then, at her request, they sat down. The occasion, as she intended it should, had taken on a solemn and important air; she faced them, flushed, serious, dogged.

"Grandma," she began, "I've been thinking a great deal. . . . I don't think we ought to go on like this. . . . Frankie and I aren't children now, you know. . . . I think—we ought to know how things stand."

The old lady looked at her but said nothing; she was waiting for a more definite challenge. She got it at once.

"I mean," said Minnie, stoutly, "what have we got to live on?"

"What's this!" cried the old lady tartly.

"I *know* we're in debt. People are getting—horrid. They don't want your—our trade. Really, Grandma, you ought to talk things over with Frankie and me."

The old lady was almost unable to speak.

"I *never!*" she repeated, again and again, "I *never!* At my time of life . . . talking things over with two girls of your age!"

"We only want to help," said Minnie, ingeniously including her sister.

"I've got on pretty well for seventy-five years without your assistance," said the old lady.

"Well," observed Minnie, "it's not what *I* call getting on. Grandma, we've got to have some sort of method. I . . . do please let us know—what there is?"

"Really, Grandma, I do think it would be better," Frankie interposed, "Minnie's a wonderful manager, and I'm sure she could help you ever so much."

"Two children! It's outrageous! I've managed . . ."

"Grandma," Minnie interrupted solemnly, "Mr. Simms spoke to me."

This was a telling blow; the old lady winced under it.

"He was in a very bad temper," Minnie went on, "and he said to me, in the rudest way, 'How many *years* longer is this bill going to run, anyway?'"

Frances was distressed by the idea of debts.

"Oh, dear!" she cried, "That's too bad! Do let's talk it over, Grandma dear, and see what can be done."

But Minnie met with an obstinacy inflexible as her own. Not one detail could they extract from the old lady. She took refuge in bitter reproach.

"I've worked for you both, day in and day out, for more than two years," she said, "and whatever money

I've spent was my own. I'm not accountable to anyone for it." And she called them undutiful, ungrateful, unkind.

"Very well, then," said Minnie at last, "if you're going to take it that way . . . if you refuse to—to co-operate, Grandma, then I'll have to accept an offer I had of a position in an office."

"What office?" Frankie asked, with interest.

"Mr. Petersen's. He says I can have your place. I'll go down to the village to-morrow and find a girl to stay with Grandma while I'm away."

Now, both Frances and Minnie knew that, on account of her liability to those mysterious "attacks," it wouldn't do to leave the old lady alone, and they wouldn't have done so under any circumstances, but she, poor old soul, terrified before their confident youth, not knowing what resources they had, felt them to be capable of everything. She pictured herself, solitary again, ill perhaps, with a strange servant prowling about, prying into everything, pilfering, undoubtedly setting the house on fire. . . .

It was a most painful scene; she broke down, cried, surrendered. Minnie, although with tears in her eyes, saw her opportunity and pressed her point.

"Grandma dear," she said, "tell us just what you have, and we'll arrange some way to manage."

The old lady confessed resentfully to a sole income of twenty-five dollars a month. They were incredulous.

"But in that case," said Frances, "you must . . . Why, there must be . . ."

"About how much do you suppose—we—owe?" asked Minnie.

This question the old lady couldn't answer, because she actually did not know. She had never attempted to calculate; it was a topic she did not care to think about. She mentioned a number of tradespeople who had been

"very nice"; in fact, she deluded herself into the belief they enjoyed serving a Defoe. They were, she assured the girls, perfectly willing to wait. Wait for Heaven knows what!

"Mr. Petersen, too, I suppose," Minnie asked with a frown, "I suppose we owe him money?"

"Dear me, child, he's only too pleased to have someone living here. He told me so himself. He couldn't rent this place to anyone else; he'd simply have to pay a caretaker."

"Why did he buy it then?" enquired Frankie.

The subject was not pursued, however, for Minnie had got up, a little pale as her great minute approached.

"Now then, Grandma and Frankie," she said, "here's my plan. I want to take charge of the housekeeping and—and the money. . . . I'll keep things going and try to pay off the debts."

"Nonsense, child! What are you going to pay them off with? How far do you imagine——"

"I've found a boarder," she said.

"A boarder!" they both cried, simultaneously.

"A literary gentleman," she explained, "from New York. He'll only pay eight dollars a week, but he's a start, anyway."

"But, my dear," Frances objected, "where could you put him?"

"Nowhere in *my* house!" cried the old lady. "I won't hear of it! It's disgraceful! It's vulgar! I won't have it!"

"I *must*!" said Minnie, "I've made up my mind. I can't and won't go on this way. Either you'll let me have this boarder or I'll have to go into Mr. Petersen's office."

They argued, wrangled, remonstrated. It was of vital importance to them both. To the old lady a boarder

meant incalculable loss of dignity, it meant degradation. She defended her position vehemently, fought to the last ditch for her honour.

But Minnie won. Her grandmother's resistance crumpled at last before her iron determination. She went up to bed that night in a sort of ecstasy of triumph, drunk with her first victory. Her career had begun. The tiger had tasted blood.

III

She met with some slight opposition from Frances, loyally concealed until they were alone, but this she easily ended by a great deal of talk about the necessity of earning a living.

That's what she called it; never facing the truth. If someone else had confronted her with it, she very likely wouldn't have recognised it. Even in her own soul she called it a chance to "earn a living," when it was really nothing but a ferocious determination to seek another man before accepting Mr. Petersen. She was resolved upon getting married. Mr. Petersen she would take if no one else presented, but not without a struggle, a gallant struggle to find a better. No one, nothing should balk her of this literary man from New York.

It was another little triumph, too, to be the object of such deep interest to her sister. They sat in the gloomy, cold bedroom, Frances on the bed with a blanket round her shoulders, while Minnie, erect on a broken little chair near the lamp, combed her heavy black hair with conscientious vigour.

"How on earth did you ever find him?" Frances asked.

"I saw his advertisement in a New York paper; he wanted country board some place where he could be quiet, for his writing. So I answered it."

Frances expressed admiration for her enterprise.

"It was wonderful for you to think of such a thing," she said, "But, Minnie, what an awful lot of work and bother for you!"

"I don't mind that," Minnie answered scornfully, "I *like* to work hard."

They sat up late, discussing the arrangement of the boarder's room and everything connected with him. They forgot nothing, overlooked nothing, except the effect of all this upon their grandmother.

She lay awake in her room, vaguely bitter, very unhappy. She had died and been buried that evening. She was supplanted. She was no longer to be the guardian of Frankie and Minnie; in the future they were to take care of her. As far as they were concerned, she was unnecessary; she was—one might say—no longer anything but an urn of sacred ashes, to be revered as the receptacle of what had once been an important human being.

They heard her coughing feebly.

"No wonder she coughs!" said Minnie. "She will *not* have the window open the least crack."

Frances spent all the next day, which was Sunday, in helping Minnie give the boarder's room a "good cleaning." They cherished a tradition that they detested such work, that it disgusted and exhausted them, but one had only to hear their voices to know that the vigorous work delighted them and that they were tremendously happy in doing it. Frankie was on her knees scrubbing the floor, while Minnie cleaned the windows. They talked incessantly; when it became necessary for Minnie to clean the outsides of the panes, Frankie always had to stop work and stand beside her, so that she could still hear.

As a sort of silent protest, their grandmother had

dressed herself in her best dress and was sitting in the parlour, reading a book of sermons. The girls insisted that they were too busy to go to church.

"I'll drive you, if you want," Minnie told her, grudgingly, "but I can't spare the time to stay through the service."

The old lady then said that all this work on the Sabbath was godless and altogether wrong, and that she wouldn't help in the least. Which Minnie smartly parried by giving her to understand that there was nothing she *could* do—at her age. Relations were very much strained. . . .

They sat down to supper, weary but profoundly satisfied.

"Well!" said Frances, "I *hope* he'll be all right. I hope he'll be the right sort."

Minnie shook her head gravely.

"Not likely," she said, "at eight dollars a week."

"It isn't money that gives people distinction," Frances protested.

"Generally it is," said Minnie.

Frances departed the next morning with a comfortable feeling that now Minnie wouldn't be so lonely. Perhaps she had a secret hope like the one Minnie so cunningly dissembled. . . .

A fortnight later she had an enthusiastic letter from Minnie, enclosing a blurred and artistic photograph of herself and the old lady, sitting in the sunset. The polite, the well-informed Mr. Blair had taken it. Then for a long time she heard no more on the subject, and she was too much engrossed in her own affairs to make enquiries about those of anyone else.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

THAT winter was for Minnie the bitterest and hardest one she was ever to know. She came to the very brink of discouragement; she had not as yet fully developed the supreme self-confidence which later sustained her through such extraordinary trials, and there were moments when she had faint doubts of her own wisdom and ability. When she *almost* regretted that she had embarked upon this course.

The boarder was practically the first man she had ever known, for Mr. Petersen she didn't count, and on him and his gentlemanly letter she had built an elaborate and exciting future. She looked upon it as almost a certainty that she would marry him. Or if not him, then some one of his literary friends, whom he would be encouraged to invite frequently to the farm. She was anxious to marry. All her maiden dreams were of marriage, never of love, always of a husband, never of a lover. She required a man who was kind and able to support her; she didn't indulge in romantic dreams of a handsome man, or a gallant one.

Still, Mr. Blair was almost too unromantic. She was shocked when she saw him. She had gone down to the station to meet him, expectant of Heaven knows what—anything but what he was; a pompous middle-aged man in spectacles and baggy, cheap clothes. She could have wept at the sight of him.

But before they had reached the house, she had begun

to see compensations in him. He was affable, obliging, and courtly; so attentive that she was disposed to overlook his age, his bagginess and his dustiness.

His conversation was remarkable. He talked ceaselessly, in a bland, slow voice. He explained everything, because all things were known to him. They passed the rubber factory, and he explained the entire process of rubber manufacture, went back to the gathering of rubber, and finally to curious facts about rubber trees. He took pains to use terms she would understand. Also he explained to her why Bess refused to pass milk waggons, and told her a great deal about horses hitherto unknown to her.

Of the old lady he made an easy conquest. He obeyed the call to supper with alacrity, but although he had had quite an hour and a half to rest and make ready, although warm water and a clean towel and a new cake of scented soap had been provided for him, it was evident that he had spent no time in washing. His nails were grimy, like his cuffs. Still, he was so pleasant and so courtly, so full of interesting information, that the two women couldn't withstand him. Especially the old lady.

"Minnie," she whispered, when the girl rose to clear the table, "why don't you make some of your fudge for Mr. Blair?"

Minnie was quite willing and Mr. Blair very much pleased; he rather archly admitted a "sweet tooth." She made haste to clear the table, and while the kettle was heating for the dishes, she started her confectionery, bending seriously over a saucepan on the fire. Michael sat watching her with scornful eyes. He never looked at anyone else; all his faith was placed in Minnie; he expected nothing from any other source.

She was somewhat surprised at seeing Mr. Blair saunter in; the kitchen was not the place for any man,

let alone a boarder. He was, however, oblivious of the proprieties. He offered to, and insisted upon, drying the dishes for her. Humorously he tied about his ample middle a gingham apron and set to work slowly but competently. He gave her many points, too, about how things might be done better, how she could save steps, and so forth. About the range, and the coal, about soaps, about how a kitchen should be arranged efficiently.

Then, when everything was neat and clean, the fire banked and Michael and his brethren locked in the cellar, he followed Minnie into the parlour, bringing a plate of the fudge.

They sat up unusually late, very cosy, about the blue china lamp, eating Minnie's candy and hearing Mr. Blair's stately voice telling of dairy farming in Holland. He admitted that he had never been there, but he *knew*. This was a curious feature about Mr. Blair; he always spoke as a witness, irrefutable and calmly positive; apparently his knowledge came through inspiration or clairvoyance, for he never mentioned having read or heard any of it.

"Well," said the old lady to Minnie, as they were going up to bed, "I don't know *when* I've spent a pleasanter evening!"

II

Mr. Blair had a remarkable opportunity to display his quality the next day, for the old lady had another of her "attacks." He at once assumed a position of authority. He sat by her bedside making the most professional enquiries, and establishing boundless confidence by his graveness and his assurance. When the doctor arrived, he met him as a colleague, conferred secretly with him, gave his own opinion and listened with professional

courtesy to that of the other. Then went out to the stable to comfort Minnie.

"It is not immediately serious," he told her; "I studied medicine for some time, and I understand these things."

He not only comforted Minnie, but he helped her in material ways. He was very "handy," somewhat in her own manner. That is, he had a certain manual facility, and was very easily satisfied: he didn't require his "jobs" either to look well or to wear well. He was of a most domestic disposition. He really enjoyed sitting in the kitchen and peeling potatoes while he talked; he even swept the parlour with wet tea leaves. He put up shelves and hooks, convenient although not quite trustworthy; he carried the old lady's trays upstairs, made the coffee for breakfast after a scientific method which required a large amount of coffee and took quite half an hour; he looked after the fire night and morning; did everything except the literary work he had come there to do.

It appeared that he had not yet begun this literary career; he had been, he said, a business man, but his health had failed, and he had decided to earn his bread by his pen. In a series of special articles on America's Industries. He had planned them all meticulously, the twelve articles, with their titles, sub-titles, number of words in each, and the space that was to be occupied by photographs. Only he had not as yet written a single sentence.

His health was deceptive; no one would have suspected him of being so broken-down, except for a lassitude that was almost incredible. He ate very well, and slept well, and was always cheerful; still it was necessary for him to take a tonic, a "heart medicine," and a "digestive stimulant." Every morning he read the newspaper thoroughly from end to end, then, after he had helped Minnie with the housework, he sat. Not reading, simply sitting,

in the sun, if there were any, but always by a window, for he liked to see anything that passed.

The relations between him and Minnie were curious. She knew that he admired her; he often said so, and she exhibited a very discreet complacency toward his compliments. She was, as always, impersonal, detached, with an agreeableness difficult to misunderstand. She was considerate and pleasant toward him, just as she was toward her grandmother—or toward Thomas Washington. What she really thought of him no one knew, but Mr. Blair, with characteristic simplicity, was sure that she was well-disposed toward him, if not something more. . . .

He was a Southerner, and a mighty consequential one. He believed that he understood women, that his gallantry, learning and courtliness combined could not fail to conquer. Even the hard fact that he made no headway did not disconcert him. He knew it was impossible for him to fail.

It was not long before his too affectionate disposition became evident. He wanted to take Minnie's hand and pat it, or even put an arm about her waist in a fatherly way. Dalliance, however, had no part in Minnie's life; it was not one of her weaknesses, and she discouraged him pretty brusquely. Or rather, tried to discourage him. After a rebuff he would stroll over to Thomas Washington's cottage and bargain to be taken into the village in Thomas's Ford. Thomas, in spite of his dignity, was not above a certain pride in being seen talking confidentially with a white man; he almost always accommodated him. And Mr. Blair would buy things for Minnie and the old lady and come cheerfully home again. They couldn't help being pleased, they had so very few pleasures. They would all sit in the old lady's room, eating the ice-cream he had brought and, of course, listening to

him. Only when he recurred to the subject of Thomas Washington and his race did they become restive. They disagreed with him strongly. In the first place, they didn't at all like the word "nigger." Then, his opinions, boiled down, amounted simply to this: that "niggers" were created simply for the convenience of Southern whites, that it was impudent and radical and altogether harmful to Southern industry for Northerners to have them in their country at all; that no one but a Southerner knew anything about them, had any right to their services, or could possibly get on with them. He and he alone knew how to "handle" Thomas Washington—that is, to exploit him. He did not think it necessary to tell them that he had to pay well for any favour received from Thomas. He wanted them to think that he stood in place of the Lord to that family—that the Washingtons, young and old, couldn't help adoring and respecting his Southernness. But Minnie and the old lady knew Thomas too well.

A great triumph for Minnie was the showing of this boarder to Mr. Petersen. He had said that she couldn't get one! He came in one afternoon and she presented them to each other, carefully watching the Swedish countenance for some sort of chagrin. Useless; he smiled his slow smile and held out a huge paw, quite willing to sit down and talk—or listen.

III

She was glad, though, that Mr. Petersen didn't know *all* about the boarder, for then her triumph wouldn't have been quite so complete. . . . His affectionateness, for instance, and his absent-mindedness. He continually forgot to pay his board. Minnie would be forced to remind him, then he would immediately take out a pocket-book and pay a week's board, apparently not realising

that he owed for two weeks, or perhaps three. He never got up to date. It was a great worry. She had to buy things for him, food and the "root beer" he was so fond of, under the most dreadful difficulties. The tradespeople, knowing that she had a boarder, presupposed cash, and grew more and more grudging. She couldn't offend and perhaps lose the precious boarder by too strict insistence upon the letter of the contract; he was supposed to pay in advance, of course, but if he didn't! . . .

There were certain times when he really alarmed her, when there was something about him that she could not endure, something not fully understood but none the less comprehended. For, in spite of her soberness and her sedateness, Minnie was after all only a young girl, and a very ignorant one. She had nothing but her instincts and her cool temperament to protect her. She had, one might say, no sex at all, no trace of passion. She adored compliments and attentions, and very sensibly wanted a husband to work for her, but she recoiled with a quite morbid aversion from the idea of a kiss. Mr. Blair's little attempts were repulsive to her.

He used to propose walks after supper, but after one trial, she never accepted again. It was a horrible experience. She was too innocent to know whether she had been insulted or whether it was all quite harmless, but she could not deny her own distress. She lay awake and wept—a very little—at the idea of marrying Mr. Blair. Of course, she could, and she would, but it wasn't an agreeable prospect.

She believed that he must have a fair enough income, for he did no work and yet had all he wanted. Tobacco and magazines and new neckties were his sole indulgences, with an occasional bag of cheap candy. He was the most contented fellow alive. It was not possible that

he suffered from the usual human "money worries." His slowness in paying his board she attributed to his literariness.

IV

It was a fine morning, late in April; Minnie had finished her work in the kitchen and was on the point of going up to "do" the bedrooms when Mr. Blair came in with a camera in his hand.

"I'm going to try to get a picture of you," he said.

She said she was busy but he waved that aside.

"Call your cats," he said pompously, "I've got an idea."

He ordered her to sit on the back steps, with Michael in her arms and the others one on each side.

"'My Lady of the Cats,' I'll call it," he said. And went on to tell her, not for the first time, of the artistic photographs he had had in various exhibitions. He told her that photography was quite as great an art as painting. She knew nothing to the contrary; she had not a drop of artist blood in her veins; who knows if perhaps she wouldn't have admired extravagantly his shadowy ladies in kimonos with light gleaming on rippling hair. She had observed that his subjects were always women, and that he had a strong penchant for glowing glimpses of white breasts and arms, and a certain unrestraint of attitude which disturbed her. He went as far as he dared with her. He wanted to take her picture climbing a ladder with an apronful of peaches, but somehow she knew that the peaches were a subterfuge, and so discouraged his artistic fancy. Then he proposed "Day Dreams," in which she was to be lying, very much stretched out, on the sofa. That too she rejected, uneasily.

This new idea, however, showed itself quite innocent

from every side, and she willingly tried to help. It was an unruly group, though; it took a tremendous time to prepare it and even at that it didn't entirely satisfy him. He looked at them through the lens, came over to Minnie and looked down at her critically.

"A little to this side," he said, and, quite unnecessarily, put a hand under her chin and turned her head.

"You have a lovely neck," he said, but though his tone was impersonal and professional, there was a repulsive look about his big, loose mouth.

He would have had a severe rebuke, boarder or no boarder, if Mr. Petersen had not saved him. But at the sight of his horse coming along the drive, she stifled her anger. She would not, in his presence, admit a failing in this boarder whom she had so brilliantly evoked. She was uneasy, though, very uneasy, wondering if Mr. Petersen had seen. . . .

"I stopped at the post-office," he said, "and fetched your mail."

She thanked him and took the solitary letter from his hand. She had, of course, to ask him to dismount, which he did, and sat on the steps, chatting with Mr. Blair and stroking Michael, whose prototype he unknowingly was. Minnie apologised and opened the letter.

Fatal letter! Fatal news! Without a word she handed it to Mr. Blair and went into the house.

She reflected over it all that night, lying awake longer than she ever had before. She knew she was beaten, that she had failed.

But this very defeat, the first she had yet known, had a curious effect upon her. She was humiliated and shaken, but far from despair. She had never felt so calm, so sensible, so competent. She wasted little time in anger or regret; she turned her thoughts firmly toward the future, looking for a way out of her trouble.

And found one, an amazing one, the first of her remarkable ventures. She planned it out in every detail that night, envisaged the obstacles and arranged her campaign against them. She certainly did not intend to stop where she was, for Mr. Petersen to laugh at, for the brilliant Frankie to pity. Wounded vanity, mixed with envy, pricked her.

Her life really began that night. Until then she had been dormant, untried; now came her first opportunity to prove her spirit, and she rose to it magnificently, gallantly, ruthlessly.

v

The day before Christmas Frankie came home.

A new Frankie, who blushed as she caught sight of Minnie at the end of the platform, engaged with Bess. Impossible that her Minnie should not notice the change in her, not read the happiness in her trembling smile.

She hugged her passionately, and climbed into the buggy beside her. She was disappointed that Minnie noticed nothing unusual, hadn't a single question to ask. And Minnie, doggedly silent, was resentful because Frankie couldn't see that something was wrong. They did not speak for a long time; then Frankie, too happy not to be affectionate, turned a bright face to her sister.

"What's the news at home?" she asked. "How's Grandma? *And* Mr. Blair?"

"Mr. Blair's gone," said Minnie, curtly.

"Gone! Not really!"

She was shocked to see tears in Minnie's eyes.

"But, my dear, what happened?"

Minnie turned away her head.

"A letter from his wife. . . ."

"So he was *married*! . . ."

"Yes. . . . He never mentioned it. . . . She wrote

that he'd written her again for his board money. She'd already given it to him twice, and couldn't afford to give it again. She said she hoped he'd pay me, but that she couldn't be responsible for his debts. That she was a business woman and found it hard enough to get along anyway. And advised me not to 'place too much confidence in his statements.' She said she was sure that by this time his health was much improved——"

"Was he ill, then?"

"Ill! He was as strong as an ox. He ate and ate. . . . And he just calmly went off. . . . He said he was going into the city to get some money from the bank, and would come back on the last train, and never did. And he owed for five weeks."

She wiped her eyes sternly and went on.

"Grandma's so mean and petty about it. Keeps saying 'I told you so, Miss.' You know she never did. She liked him more than anyone did. I'll never hear the end of it."

Frances did her best to console the frustrated Minnie.

"Maybe he'll come back," she suggested, inanely.

"He'd better not!" said Minnie, "Nasty, lazy cheat! Oh, Frankie, I will admit that I was deceived in that man!"

Obviously this was no moment in which to tell *her* news. With patience and good temper Frankie waited, listened to the long and harrowing story of Mr. Blair and said what she could to heal her sister's wound. She was really distressed about Minnie, she was so unlike her usual self; she was severe and cold. It would be nothing less than cruel to tell the poor soul of her own good-fortune.

So she kept it to herself all the afternoon. With the superstition so natural to the happy, she fancied she was making her happiness more secure, earning it, in a way,

by repressing and disciplining herself, pretending to take an interest in the affairs of the household, effacing herself and her important news.

No one questioned her; they were absorbed in their own calamity. The old lady showed her a sort of diary of the expenses incurred by Mr. Blair, "to say nothing of the extra work." She did crow over Minnie without mercy; she was vindicated, once more the infallible adult, competent to guide and rebuke youth. Minnie said very little; she had, however, a sinister air of having something up her sleeve.

VI

At last they were alone in the bedroom. Minnie had just locked the door when Frances sprang at her, caught her in a tight embrace, and whispered:

"Minnie!"

"What?" asked Minnie sharply.

"Minnie! . . . *I'm engaged!*"

Minnie gasped.

"Why, Frankie!" she cried. "How on earth! . . ."

"Oh, darling, I've been longing to tell you! . . . I'm so happy! If you only knew him, Minnie! You couldn't help liking him. There's something about him. . . . He's so dear and boyish——"

"Who is he?" Minnie asked.

"He's an Englishman. Very nice family, and all that. The nicest manners. And I consider him really handsome. Just the type we've always liked, Minnie."

It occurred to Frances that Minnie was not so enthusiastic as the occasion warranted. She felt a sudden fear that Minnie was jealous, felt herself neglected.

"We've talked so much about you," she hurried on. "You're going to live with us after we're married, and we're going to do everything to make you happy. I told

Lionel what a little brick you were, slaving away here, and he said he knew he'd love you. And, oh, Minnie, you're *sure* to love him!"

Instead of answering Minnie got up and went to the window, stood there, staring out at the fields.

"Minnie!" cried her sister, "Please, Minnie, darling, say you're glad!"

"I am," said Minnie, keeping her back turned, "I'm very glad you're so happy."

"Please you be happy too! I'm going to make Lionel write to you the instant I get back."

"Frankie," said Minnie, "you're not going back."

There was something unmistakably sinister in her voice now; Frances looked at her nervously.

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean just what I say. You're not going back to New York. I'm going and you'll have to stay here."

"But what . . . Minnie, what nonsense! I have my job and Lionel . . ."

"They'll have to get on without you," said Minnie.

"You're crazy!" said her sister. "What would you do in New York? And who'll take care of Grandma?"

"You."

"I shouldn't dream of giving up my job."

"You'll have to. I tell you, Frankie, I'm going to have my turn. I've stopped here a whole year while you've been in the city and I'm sick and tired of it. I'm *through*. I'm going!"

"You can't be such a beast. After I've just told you about Lionel."

"He can come out here to see you."

"He can't. He's too poor. He couldn't pay the fare."

"Then you'd better not bother about him. You certainly couldn't marry him if he's as poor as that."

"Minnie, please be reasonable. I'll just go back for a few weeks——"

"You shan't go back at all."

"I will! I won't give in to your nonsense."

"It's not nonsense; it's justice. You've had a year and now I'm going to have a year. You didn't care whether or not I wanted you to go, and now I don't care whether you want me to go or not. I'm going."

Frances smiled scornfully.

"I'll go back as usual," she said.

"Oh, *will* you! I've got a nice place myself."

"I don't believe it! What sort of place?"

"I'm going to be Aunt Irene's companion," she said calmly, "And I'm going to get just as much as you're getting."

They fought it out passionately, forgot their dignity, forgot their love, raised their voices until the poor old lady at the end of the corridor heard them. They cried, too, tears of anger and hysteria; at last, from sheer exhaustion they fell asleep side by side in the bed they had slept in together for so many nights in harmony and affection, fell asleep hating each other, each utterly resolved upon her own way.

VII

But Minnie conquered. When Frances woke up, she found herself alone. Minnie had left a note on the pillow.

"Gone on the early train. Grandma knows all about it, and agrees with me that I am doing perfectly right."

BOOK TWO: FRANKIE'S BRIEF DAY

CHAPTER NINE

I

FRANKIE was quite desperate with grief and anxiety. She rushed into the old lady's room, bare-footed, in her nightdress, and denounced her in a storm of sobs.

"How *could* you!" she cried. "How *could* you! How did you and Minnie dare to arrange my life for me that way? . . . You didn't know. . . . You couldn't know—what plans I had. . . . How *could* you! You don't know what you've done!"

The old lady said that no great harm had been done.

"It has! It has!" Frankie cried. "You don't know! You've spoiled everything!"

This the old lady didn't believe; she asked for an explanation, and Frances would give none.

"But Grandma!" she implored, "Grandma, trust me! Believe me when I say I've got to go back! It's terribly important. It means my whole life. Oh, Grandma, please, *please* write to Minnie and make her come home!"

"My dear child, I can't. She wouldn't come. And I must say I think she's entitled to a little—— Don't you think you're rather selfish, Frances?"

"Oh, stop!" Frances interrupted, rudely. "You don't understand. It's something . . . I *have* to see about, something important."

"What can it be?"

The old lady was indulgent; she fancied she scented a sentimental interest.

"I can't tell you—just now, anyway."

Frances dried her eyes and looked at her grandmother with a new look, hard and clear.

"You'll have to make out alone for a few hours," she said, "I've got to go in on that four-eight train. I'll be back some time to-night."

She went into her room and, closing the door, flung herself down on the creaking bed, not to cry, but to think, to plan for him. All morning the breakfast dishes were unwashed, the beds unmade, nothing touched in the house. It was noon when a curious sound startled Frankie. She fancied she heard a step in the passage.

She flung open the door, to see a poor, trembling little figure come out of her grandmother's room.

"Grandma!" she shrieked, and flew to catch her and half carry her back to her bed, reproaching her bitterly, tenderly, while she got her clothes off. She noticed with intolerable remorse how clumsily the things were put on and the scanty hair twisted up.

"Grandma," she cried. "You know you shouldn't! Suppose you had slipped! It was dreadful of you!"

She saw to her horror that there were tears in the poor thing's eyes and her feeble voice quavered.

"Frances," she said, "I couldn't stand it. Both of you going off . . . neither of you wanting to stay with me. . . . I felt I didn't care what happened to me. . . . And——" she broke into a weak little sob as she came to her last and worst grief, "one o'clock and the house not touched! I just couldn't lie abed any longer!"

"No, Granny dear, I know! I'll do everything right away. Only lie down and rest, won't you? I'll do everything before I go."

The old lady patted her hand.

"Won't you ask Sally Washington to sit in the kitchen while you're gone?" she asked. "I'm so nervous about fire."

Frankie hurried across to the cottage, but Sally couldn't come; she was sick in bed and there was no one available but young Norman Washington, aged nine, who was guaranteed by his mother to be trustworthy.

The old lady, however, rejected him.

"Worse than no one!" she cried. "A boy! He'll eat up all my preserves. And goodness knows *what* he'll break."

It also occurred to her that he was quite likely, in his quality as boy, to set fire to the house; in fact, as she considered it longer, she declared it *certain* that he would do so.

She was in a pitifully nervous state. She entreated Frances to dress her again and help her downstairs, so that she could wait there, where, in case of fire, she could manage somehow to get out. She couldn't eat anything for lunch. She sat propped up in bed, her trembling fingers moving ceaselessly, her watery eyes staring vacantly, in dim anxiety, consumed with dread, with the horror of her own helplessness. As she passed by the door, Frances could see her there, each time more intolerably pitiful. Until, one time, she saw her press her poor, clawlike hand against her mouth. . . . Somehow that decided Frances; she *couldn't* leave her; couldn't endure the idea of her alone there until two in the morning, when the last train would have brought her back. No; she couldn't go. She went into the room, hard and brusque again.

"I won't go to the city," she said. "I'll just harness up Bess somehow and go to the village and send a telegram."

All over—all finished. She knew it. She had no hope, no illusion about the matter, only the certainty that her terribly brief time of happiness was done.

II

Happiness which existed now only in her memory, in time to grow incredible even there. . . .

One year!

She remembered very well when she had made that first visit to Miss Eppendorfer. She had never before been alone in New York, didn't know how to find the address, had to ask one policeman after another, and try in a sort of agony to comprehend the directions they gave. And when she had arrived, her terror of the unknown city was supplanted by a worse one; suppose she didn't get the job, that the authoress didn't like her, and she had to return home, shamefully defeated.

She had plenty of time to contemplate this, waiting in the sitting-room of Miss Eppendorfer's flat. An insolent coloured girl showed her in and left her there without a word. She was almost ill from nervousness; she watched the door without stirring for fifteen minutes or so, then, when no one came, grew bold enough to look about her. It was a small and rather dark room, furnished in a style new to her—the ubiquitous Mission style. Little square chairs of imitation weathered oak, with imitation leather seats, studded with gilt nails, fit for an authoress from the Middle West to sit in while she laughed indulgently at Victorian mahogany. Mock austerity, mock simplicity, a crowd of cheap and monotonous stuff, all square and squat; plain curtains, bookcases with sets of books selected always by authorities, and never by the owner. Replica of a thousand rooms, mirror of a thousand souls, a room which signified and expressed nothing. It was the first cheaply-furnished room Frances had ever entered, and she was innocently impressed with it. The good taste she possessed was not innate, it was traditional; she wasn't able to judge the unknown.

The mistress of all this came in an hour late. She was a thin, blonde woman with hollow cheeks and a sweet, sweet smile; she hurried forward, holding out both hands with a profuse cordiality that surprised Frances.

"Is this the little country girl who's going to do so much for me?"

Blushing but courageous, Frances made some sort of answer, her candid eyes fixed on the face before her. If she hadn't *known*, she might have thought that this haggard woman with bleached hair was "not quite nice." But she knew that her rural standards couldn't be applied everywhere. She wasn't a bumpkin. . . .

"Sit down," Miss Eppendorfer invited, "and we'll have tea while we chat."

It was the first time Frances had ever had tea; it was an institution as yet unknown in the suburbs during her girlhood, and utterly undeveloped in Brownsville Landing; there, when one had guests in the afternoon, they were splendidly served with lemonade and good cake. Tea and toast would have been almost an insult.

The authoress had to fetch everything herself from the kitchen.

"I don't dare to disturb that black wretch," she whispered to Frances. "She's only looking for an excuse to go, and *then* where shall I be? *I* couldn't boil an egg, could you?"

Frances said that she could.

"Well, my dear," said the authoress, when she had got her samovar started, "tell me about yourself."

But she didn't need much telling; aside from the letter she had had from the librarian in Brownsville Landing, she could see in one shrewd glance that Frances would "do"; was able to realise, as only an imitation could, how honest, how genuine was this girl.

She engaged her then and there, said she was "strange-

ly attracted" by her. And urged her to take up her duties at once.

"Send home for your things," she advised, "and settle right down to-night in your comfy little room. That's the way I always like to do things—on the spur of the moment."

"I'd like to, but I couldn't. They'd worry at home."

"Send a telegram, honey," Miss Eppendorfer suggested.

It was her first telegram, too, and it gave her a delightful sense of adventure, and of defiance, for she knew that Minnie would disapprove.

Miss Eppendorfer opened the door of a tiny room, which, she said, was to be Frankie's "very own."

"Isn't it *dear?*" she asked. "I think I must have *known* when I furnished it, that someone just like you was coming to me some day. It *expresses* you, don't you think so?"

At first Frances thought it a delightful room, furnished all in wicker even to the bed and decorated in gay chintz; there were candles on the dressing table with rose-covered shades which at once took her eye, and a brocade glove box. She felt that she would be tremendously happy in such a nest.

And then, as she laid her hat on the bed, she was startled, dismayed, at the sight of the pillow-cases. Suspicions aroused, her glance travelled from corner to corner, and she apprehended the appalling griminess of the place. Griminess not confined to this room of "her very own," as she was soon to discover.

She had turned back the lace-trimmed chintz bedspread and was suspiciously examining the sheets when Miss Eppendorfer came in again with a filmy nightdress decorated with pale green ribbons, a boudoir cap and an elaborate negligee.

"Put these on now and be comfy," she urged, "and we'll have a nice little supper, all alone together."

She herself had got into a lace tea-gown over a torn lace petticoat and quilted satin slippers which weren't high enough to hide the holes in her stockings. . . .

"Thank you," said Frances, "but I'm quite comfortable as I am."

She felt that her neat linen blouse and dark skirt gave her a sort of advantage; anyway she *couldn't* have gone trailing about in a wrapper, she wasn't that sort.

Disillusionment progressed rapidly. She sat down at the supper table, hungry and curious, and disposed to be charitable; but the dirtiness of the tablecloth was flagrant and her napkin had obviously been used before. And her glass had a milky ring inside it. . . . She was not over-fastidious, or inclined to give great importance to domestic matters, but she had a genuine passion for cleanliness. She couldn't help being disgusted. Still, she reflected, it was no doubt all due to the scornful coloured girl, and she consoled herself by thinking that perhaps, when not engaged in literary work, she could look after things a bit.

She put on the ribbon-trimmed nightdress and went to sleep between the dubious sheets, a little homesick for the big, airy bedroom where Minnie was lying, and the darkness and the quiet. Her window opened on to a court; she could hear voices talking and phonographs playing, and the light from Miss Eppendorfer's room shone under her door and disturbed her. She couldn't compose herself, she was excited and confused, and imagined that she lay awake for hours.

Miss Eppendorfer came in to wake her up the next morning, in a state of great excitement, still wearing the trailing tea-gown. She told Frankie that the coloured girl had gone; and she related a long story of

wrongs and grievances; the girl drank, lied, pilfered, was even engaged in complicated plots against one of the best and kindest mistresses extant. Miss Eppendorfer gave a list of her benefactions: a pink hat, a dotted veil, blouses, shoes, and still——!

"She used to say all sorts of things about me over the telephone, if anyone rang up when I was out. And, my dear, the things she told that hall-boy!"

Frankie pitied her distress and was eager to soothe her excitement.

"Never mind!" she said, "We'll find another. And now wouldn't you like me to make a cup of coffee for you?"

"Oh, I *would*, my dear! I'm no good till I've had my coffee, and I can't make it decently myself."

She sat down on the bed, and though Frances waited impatiently for a chance to get up, she showed no signs of moving. Nothing could have induced Frankie to dress in her presence. A faint annoyance crept over her. She got out of bed on the other side, gathered up her clothes and went into the bathroom, with a brusque excuse.

She came out, stiffer and straighter than ever, and went into the tiny kitchen to make the coffee. It was the filthiest place; roaches running over everything, grease, dust, crumbs.

"That girl was a very poor servant," she said severely.

Miss Eppendorfer was sitting on a corner of the table, swinging her slippered feet.

"I spoil them," she said. "I'm too good to them. And then I don't *keep after* them. You have to, if you want anything done. . . . But with my writing, of course I can't keep my mind on that sort of thing very well."

She praised the coffee extravagantly, and, as she drank it, explained to Frankie that she was very, very nervous, and that a scene such as she had had with that dreadful

girl upset her beyond measure. Frances noticed her trembling hands, her quick breath, and accepted this nervousness, and, in her competent way, went about making her comfortable.

They had a rather pleasant day together. The hall-boy was sent to fetch "Jennie," who had often before come to fill in gaps, and while she was creaking and wheezing, scrubbing and mopping her faithful way round the flat, the authoress lay on a sofa and talked to Frankie. She told her about her work, which so far consisted of three short stories and two very successful novels.

"But I'm really only beginning," she said.

(Frances thought privately that she was rather old for any sort of beginning.)

Her latest book was called "The Lonely Woman." She gave a copy to Frances and begged for a candid opinion after she had read it.

"But I'm not a judge," Frances told her earnestly, "I don't know anything about literature. Only that I love books and reading."

"My dear," said Miss Eppendorfer, "I saw at once how sensible and level-headed you were. I *want* your opinion!"

Noon came. Miss Eppendorfer sighed as the clock struck.

"I do *not* feel equal to going out," she said, "I'd rather do without lunch. Of course, there's plenty in the house, but Jennie can't cook a thing."

Frances was quite willing to get a lunch ready, and to bring it on a tray to the nervous authoress. Also tea and supper. Otherwise there was nothing to do but sit and talk.

III

Frances would have found it difficult to explain what her secretarial duties were during that year. Principally to go with Miss Eppendorfer everywhere that she went—to the shops, the bank, the dentist. She was too nervous to go out alone; she wouldn't stir without her "little pal"; and, as far as Frances could see, she had no other friends. There were a few people who telephoned, and who very rarely dropped in to see her, but she never got invitations of any sort. It puzzled Frances; she could see no reason why Miss Eppendorfer shouldn't be popular; in the first place, she was a quite successful writer, which should have brought some sort of fame, and in the second place, she had an excellent disposition. They lived together, all day and every day, month after month, those two women, without a sharp or a violent word, with the exception of the two famous Scenes, to be described later. And these didn't exactly count, for the authoress was not altogether responsible, altogether herself then. . . . Of course, there were times when relations were a bit strained, but not often. And the remarkable, the admirable thing was, that they were *not* congenial, not in any way suited to each other; it was simply their common kindness and good temper that so preserved harmony.

Lack of friends was not the only point to puzzle Frankie; there were other mysteries. It was a long time before she could understand Miss Eppendorfer, or appraise her with any justice. At first she saw much to disgust her. The slatternliness, above all, the shameless lack of pride. She used to look across the supper table at the pallid, faded blonde creature, with uncombed hair, still dressed in a wrapper over her nightdress, and wonder how, *how* . . . ! Even this, though, she learned to condone when she saw that it sprang not so much from neglect as from awful weariness. The poor soul was

either hectic with excitement, flying from shop to shop, restaurant to restaurant, taking every meal away from home for perhaps a week, or else she couldn't make up her mind even to walk round the corner for a breath of air, would stay shut up in the flat for days. She dressed well enough when she went out; she spent money lavishly on her clothes and wore them with a conspicuous and rather vulgar sort of style, but she didn't really care; had no sort of decent pride in her body. Didn't trouble much about cleanliness, for instance.

Her book, too, was a shock to Frances. It was the story of a woman living on the prairies—the Lonely Woman—alone with a stolid husband; then a young clergyman stopped there on his way somewhere, and chapter after chapter recounted the wiles, the lures of the lonely woman to rouse his passion, to destroy his honour. In the end she got him, triumphed for a few lurid days, and then tried to run away with him. But they were overtaken by a blizzard and died, frozen to death. The pursuing husband saw them, sitting clasped in each other's arms, and shot them, not knowing that they were already dead, and then gave himself up to the police and was hanged. It was what her publishers called "palpitating"—very. Nothing was left to the imagination.

Frances thought it awful; she hadn't been trained to see the poetry in lust. All she could say in praise was that the prairie scenes seemed very true to life, and Miss Eppendorfer assured her that they were.

"I've lived out there," she said. She often told scraps of her past life, but they wouldn't piece together; sometimes one story directly contradicted another. She had been married, sometimes she said once, sometimes twice, and her husband—or first husband—had been "unspeakable." She had divorced him, or he her. Sometimes she described her childhood as ideally happy, her parents as wealthy and indulgent; then, once, she told Frances she

was the daughter of a wretched woman who had lived with a worker in the Chicago stockyards. Yet all this didn't impress Frances as lying; it was too vague, too aimless; she couldn't help a stupid feeling that Miss Eppendorfer didn't *know* exactly what had happened to her. Which was of course absurd. . . . And she was sure that the stories which told of want, pain, and struggle were the true ones, that the poor woman had suffered.

Talent she undoubtedly possessed. Although Frances detested the persistent fleshliness of her stories, she had a generous admiration for the gift itself. She would watch her writing, almost with awe, wondering where the ideas came from, from what unfathomable reservoir she drew so easily. She had no style, little art, couldn't even use the language properly; simply she put on paper the visions of her curious mind. She sometimes used to cry as she wrote. And, although her books were oversensual, her talk wasn't. She avoided those topics which distressed the austere Frances.

IV

It was not for six months that Frances got her first clue to this baffling creature. She tried to study her, to understand her, why she had no friends, no "circle" such as she had imagined literary people always had, why she was sometimes so slovenly, sometimes so extravagantly dressed, why sometimes she couldn't bear to go out, and sometimes couldn't endure staying at home.

It was after one of her infrequent visits home. Miss Eppendorfer hated to let her go, and would never go out during her absence, which naturally used to distress Frankie and cause her to cut her time at home unduly short. She did everything possible before leaving, and always saw to it that Jennie was there, under a solemn promise not to leave for a minute until she got back;

then with soothing assurances, as if Miss Eppendorfer were a very nervous child, she would pack her bag and hurry off, oppressed and serious, worrying over the household she had left.

This time, when she came back, Jennie didn't answer the bell. She rang again and again, but couldn't hear a sound. Then she questioned the hall-boy and he told her Jennie had left that morning, but that Miss Eppendorfer was at home.

"Maybe she's asleep," he said, with a grin.

Frances turned white, remembering all the stories she had read of suicides and murders.

"Isn't there *any* way I can get in?" she cried.

The boy leisurely suggested going to the flat below and asking leave to go up through the fire escape. He didn't offer to do it for her; he was, on the contrary, as indifferent, as contemptuous as he could well be.

Fortunately the window on the fire escape was open and Frances got in without difficulty. And rushed into Miss Eppendorfer's room.

She was asleep, her mouth open, her hair in her eyes, lying on the outside of the bed with no covering but a gauzy nightdress. The room was full of a smell unfamiliar to Frances, but she surmised, even before she saw the empty bottle.

Whiskey.

Somehow she got the poor thing warmly and decently covered up and the horrible littered room tidied. Then she went into her own room and sank into a chair, for her knees would support her no longer. She couldn't *think* about it, her intelligence seemed to have fled, to be suspended, waiting. She was conscious of nothing but horror and a reluctant and painful compassion. She felt that now, after this, she could never, never leave Miss Eppendorfer.

CHAPTER TEN

I

FRANCES did not mention this shortcoming of Miss Eppendorfer's at home, and it was never openly referred to between the authoress and herself. But Miss Eppendorfer ceased to be so careful, she was even relieved that Frances knew her vice and that she didn't have to live in fear of her discovering it. The whiskey came openly with the grocery orders, then vanished into her own room. She was never to be seen drinking it, but there were many mornings when she couldn't be awakened till noon, and when she did get up, she would be in a state that wrung Frankie's kindly heart. The poor shaky, weeping thing, moaning about her aching head, swallowing her dreadful "headache cures," and waiting in agony till relief came. . . . Frances had to sit by her, holding her hand and trying to quiet and cheer her. She struggled against disgust, but in vain; she would reach the point where the whole affair seemed intolerable, and she was determined to go home, and then Miss Eppendorfer would suddenly change, get up in the morning, dress elaborately and take her "little pal" out for a day of amusement. She was at such times so ingratiatingly kind that Frances put aside all thought of leaving her. No doubt these intervals of hectic excitement were her periods of reform; in fact, she almost admitted it.

"I have to keep on going," she said, "to take my mind off things."

Curious that Frances should find herself so placed, Frances who had been brought up to regard drunkenness

in a man as a bestial crime, and in a *woman*, a thing almost impossibly awful. She sometimes wondered at herself, how was it that she didn't blame Miss Eppendorfer, but looked upon her failing as if it were a disease? She felt herself very old, very experienced. In spite of her pity and real unhappiness over the thing, there was in it a deep, secret satisfaction; it was, she felt, Knowledge, Life; she was learning, developing. She had so far, far outgrown Minnie and her grandmother and their standards! She was tolerant, worldly-wise; there wasn't, she believed, much more for her to learn. . . .

The future rather worried her. This couldn't last forever, and after this, what? She was not gaining experience that would be of any practical value to her in any other position. She was not able to save money; at the end of six months she found herself no better off than when her career had begun. And she was so ambitious, so passionately anxious to succeed, to be important and famous. She gave her problem much serious thought. One thing was certain; she couldn't and wouldn't leave Miss Eppendorfer under the present circumstances; the only thing was for her to prepare herself, to be ready for something better when there was a change of some sort. She presented her scheme to Miss Eppendorfer as tactfully as possible.

"I've been thinking," she said, "if I knew how to type better and faster, and something of shorthand, I'd be ever so much more useful . . . to you, and—and in general . . . I wrote to a business school near here, and I think, if you don't mind, I'll take a course there in shorthand and typing. Three evenings a week, from seven to nine."

But Miss Eppendorfer protested, begged her to put it off and not to leave her so much alone. She was

afraid of this plan, afraid that she would, by it, lose this girl she so much needed.

"Just wait a month, dear, won't you? Till the days are longer?"

It seemed an idiotic reason to Frances, and she looked obstinate.

"Perhaps I could take the course with you," Miss Eppendorfer suggested, "I think I'd enjoy it."

That idea didn't please Frankie at all; the thought of going to school with anyone of Miss Eppendorfer's age, appearance and temperament was appalling. She imagined what people would say—how they would be ridiculed. She was obliged to postpone the plan for a time, until she could think of a different way of presenting it. . . .

Chance gave her an opportunity very soon. One morning the telephone rang, in itself a rare happening, and she hurried to answer it, as the authoress was asleep.

"Is this Miss Eppendorfer?" enquired a high, loud voice with an exaggerated London accent. "Oh, her secretary! Very well! You will please to tell Miss Eppendorfer that her cousin Kurt Hassler from Hamburg is here, and would like to call."

"She's not awake yet," Frances explained, "but if you'll leave your number——"

"The Ritz," he replied haughtily. "Find it in the telephone directory. I am here until one."

She had scarcely replaced the receiver when Miss Eppendorfer opened the door of her room and stood smiling absent-mindedly at her.

"I thought I heard the telephone," she said.

"You did. It was your cousin from Hamburg. He wants to see you."

Miss Eppendorfer became immensely excited, and insisted upon Frankie's calling him up at once.

"I'm too nervous," she said. "Tell him to come to-night for dinner at seven."

He accepted the invitation, and the authoress was delighted.

"I haven't seen him since he was a child," she told Frankie, "but I've heard lots about him. He went to Heidelberg, and then he went into his father's business and he's done wonderfully well, they say. He speaks English, French and Spanish perfectly."

"Are you a German then?" Frankie asked.

"No; my father was, but I'm not. I'm American through and through. I can't even speak German. If Kurt didn't speak English, I don't know what I'd do."

While she drank her coffee, Miss Eppendorfer ingenuously confided to Frances her great desire to impress Mr. Hassler.

"You see, his family—my father's cousins, over in Germany, always looked down on us. They were as rude as they could be. You know how proud those old commercial families are. Why, my dear, Kurt Hassler would never have *dreamed* of putting his foot inside my door if I hadn't got a name for myself with this writing. So I'm going to show him that I'm somebody, after all. That I know how to do things *right*!"

Jennie was fetched to wait on the table, and supper was ordered from a restaurant nearby, with an extravagant variety of wines. Miss Eppendorfer dressed herself in her very best, and implored Frances to do the same, but Frances, although expecting a bearded and majestic man in evening dress, refused to put on any of the authoress's finery.

"He's not coming to see me," she cried, "and, anyway, I'd rather look like what I am."

Proud humility! And wasn't she aware all the time that in her fresh blouse and blue serge skirt she utterly

eclipsed Miss Eppendorfer, she with her clear brown skin and her beautifully honest eyes, with her youth and strength and dignity?

She had resented Mr. Hassler's manner over the telephone and she had only to take one look at him in person to hate and detest him forever. He was unexpectedly young, not so old as herself, she imagined, but with a self-assurance seldom attained by other races this side of forty. He was handsome enough, but detestably arrogant, a smooth-shaven, blonde-crested boy with upturned nose and wide, impudent mouth. He was stupid and pompous, couldn't talk about anything but himself and his "world-export business" as he called it, yet Frances saw that he had wit enough to take the measure of his cousin. His gallantry was so obviously mocking that she burned with shame for the poor haggard, painted woman who gulped it down. It was really torment for her to look on.

Alas, poor Frankie! She had yet to learn of Miss Eppendorfer's second great weakness!

II

After that evening everything was changed, Miss Eppendorfer herself a quite different person. She was as good-tempered, as kindly as ever, but so silly that Frankie's own amiability began to wear thin. She wrote no more, all her talk was of clothes, of hair dressers, of manicures. She would spend all morning sitting at her dressing table, polishing her nails and "jabbering," as her secretary mentally called her talking. She was full of the affectations of a happy young girl, was impulsive, whimsical, even pouted. And for whom but that obnoxious little Hamburger, young enough to be her son!

He called every evening, and made it plain to Frankie that he wanted to be alone with his cousin. So she with-

drew to her bedroom and tried to read, to ignore that light, hysterically gay voice answering his impudent compliments.

"Can't she see?" Frankie used to ask herself, almost in tears. "Doesn't she know he's laughing at her? Oh, what an idiot she's making of herself, poor old thing!"

He and Frances hated each other. She stared at him with cold contempt, he looked her up and down insolently; they never spoke unless it couldn't be avoided. Unfortunately Frances had to listen to a great deal about him from Miss Eppendorfer, how successful and brilliant he was in business, how supremely well-educated, how fastidious and aristocratic, how irresistible to the fair sex. He told her about his "affairs" and she insisted upon telling Frankie, although the latter said bluntly enough that she wasn't interested. It was necessary that she should be shown what a remarkable conquest Miss Eppendorfer had made. She was forced to hear about the Russian princess, the awfully exclusive Parisienne, and above all about the eminent and very chic Damen in Wien. The colossal success he had had! Frances had either to consider him a liar, or the ladies on the continent of Europe as pitifully lacking in taste.

He very soon began coming to dinner every night, and Miss Eppendorfer went to great trouble to secure a cook who was not only a German, but a German from the only correct part of Germany for cooks to inhabit. She extorted big wages and made life wretched with her shrewishness, but her delicacies were supposed to atone for all this. Expenses mounted steadily; Frances had not imagined that Miss Eppendorfer had so much money. She bought new clothes continually, and flowers, and very expensive wines. Mr. Hassler was not absent for a single night for two months after the coming of the German cook, but not once did he invite his cousin to go any-

where with him, or did he bring her flowers or sweets.

Frances could not comprehend this thing; she thought she did, but she didn't, in the least. It was the sort of affair not related in romantic novels; there was nothing romantic about it. It might be classified as a "love affair," although it would have been confoundedly hard to find any love in it. . . . Frankie simply thought that Miss Eppendorfer was "silly" about the young man, and anxious to impress him, and that he was attracted by the good dinners.

Her first real suspicions awoke when she was checking up the stubs in the authoress's cheque book, which she did every month when the vouchers came back from the bank. And she saw, no less than five times, cheques made out to "Kurt Hassler" for fifty dollars, sixty dollars, up to a hundred. It gave her a vague feeling of uneasiness, which she couldn't shake off, although she assured herself that it was all "business."

Then she and Miss Eppendorfer had the first of their quarrels. The cook wanted a day off, and Miss Eppendorfer gaily asked Frankie if she wouldn't cook one of her dear little suppers for "Kurtie." Frances flushed.

"Why don't you go to a restaurant?" she suggested.

"Kurtie's so sick of restaurants. I told him what heavenly things you used to fix up for me, and he said he'd like to see what you could do. He's——"

"I'm sorry," said Frances, "but I'd rather not."

"My dear! Please! I've practically promised."

"I can't help it. I *couldn't*."

"But *why*?"

Frances looked at her indignantly.

"I wouldn't cook for *that man*!" she said, severely.

"What is your objection to him, may I ask?" enquired Miss Eppendorfer, with sudden frigidity.

"I'd rather not say."

"I insist."

"I'm not going to say. It has nothing to do with the case, anyway. I don't mind—I *never* mind doing things for *you*. But . . . I should think you'd know better than to ask me to cook for your guests. I'm supposed to be your secretary, Miss Eppendorfer, not your servant."

She was startled by the expression on Miss Eppendorfer's face.

"A hell of a secretary you are!" she screamed. "You don't know a damned thing. You're no more use to me than a parrot. You take my money and never do a stroke of work. You're as lazy as a nigger." And much, much more, of abuse that grew fouler and fouler, most of it unintelligible to the girl. She stood motionless, white as a sheet, dumb with horror, her own little anger swept away on this violent torrent. She never forgot the scene, or the words.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Oh! . . . How terrible! . . . Oh, God, how terrible!"

For she had a dreadful feeling of helplessness, of being in a world where her dignity was of no avail. She cried forlornly for Minnie and her grandmother, even for her mother, dead a score of years.

She had packed her trunk and was absolutely determined to go home that night when Miss Eppendorfer came to the door, imploring to be let in. She, too, was in tears, streaming with tears, and she went down on her knees to Frances.

"Forgive me!" she cried. "Forgive me! Frances, darling, you know how terribly nervous I am! Don't be too hard on me. I can't live without you!"

She was so dreadfully upset that Frances had to get her to bed and give her a dose of some powerful sedative she used for her "nerve attacks," and telephoned to

Hassler not to come. And in the end she agreed not to go home.

But she remained very grave and thoughtful. She went out to supper at a little French table d'hôte nearby, came back and went to bed, without seeing Miss Eppendorfer again.

She was waked up late that night, though, by her. The poor creature was crying again, standing by Frankie's bed.

"Oh, Frances!" she moaned, "I'm so wretched! I wish I were dead!"

Frances asked what was the matter.

"Kurt was so nasty to me," she sobbed. "I rang him up after you'd gone out, and he came. But he wouldn't stay a minute. He just looked at the supper and went away. I *tried*! I had sardines and caviare and fruit, all fixed in a dainty way. . . . Oh, *Frances!*"

Her voice rose to a shriek that alarmed Frances.

"Don't get excited!" she entreated. "Just tell me, quietly, all about it. First let me close the window."

It was an incoherent tale; he had told her that she didn't know how to dress, that he wouldn't be seen in a public place with her, that at *her* age she shouldn't try to wear pink. Told her she looked vulgar. That he couldn't see a trace in her conversation of the brains he imagined were required in novel writing.

Frances was exasperated.

"Why in the world do you bother with him!" she cried. "He's—I'm sure you're deceived in him. Why don't you let him go?"

Miss Eppendorfer began to weep anew.

"I love him!" she declared. And seeing Frankie's shocked face, she added, with humane motive, "We're going to be married!"

Frances believed it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

AFTER this, Miss Eppendorfer was not able to make any further objection to Frankie's study.

"I may as well tell you now," said Frankie, "that I shan't—I couldn't stay with you after you're married to that man."

"But it won't be for a long time," Miss Eppendorfer protested.

A very long time indeed! Dimly, in her muddled head, she realised how much she wanted and needed Frankie, even foresaw the day when Mr. Kurt Hassler would go the way of other men to whom she had been so generous, and she would be quite alone. She tried to bribe her not to learn shorthand, she didn't want her to be able to find another place; she said it would tire her, hurt her eyes, everything she could imagine.

Frances was firm.

"You're not alone in the evenings now," she said, "and I've got to think of my own future."

"I'll always look after you——"

"I don't want to be looked after, thank you. Please don't be unreasonable!"

Miss Eppendorfer cried a little and consented.

II

Frances found it a curious experience. She wrote home to Minnie, after the first week:

"I'm a sort of grandmother here in the business school. All the rest are little girls with pigtails and hair ribbons,

and little boys in short trousers. You can imagine how I feel, so old and sedate. And even in size! They're all so stunted. I tower above my tiny desk. I'm taller even than any of the teachers, and quite a different colour, at least five degrees redder.

"I thought I knew something about typing, but I've had to start all over again, and learn the 'touch system.' And shorthand! Oh, Minnie! I'm so stupid, you can't think. The others learn like eager little trained animals. They can't speak decently, or spell, of course, but what does that matter? They can put down on paper what they hear someone say, and copy it off, without the trouble of understanding. I foresee that I shall be here for years while all the little boys and girls pass on and out, and become bank presidents."

It was quite true that she wasn't quick at learning her new trade. She was studious by nature, and painstaking, but her hand was not ready. She was more discouraged than she cared to tell.

Life seemed, just then, a rather miserable affair. Her ambition was balked by her slowness in learning, and she began to think that she would never be able to do better than she was doing with Miss Eppendorfer. A filler of odd jobs, employed principally because she was personally agreeable. . . . And, somehow, Miss Eppendorfer's talk of love made her lonely and sad. She thought of her twenty-three years, and was terrified by the fear that she would never be loved. She longed so to be loved! What chance, though? She went from Miss Eppendorfer's flat, which no man entered but "Kurtie," to the night school, where the oldest male was perhaps nineteen.

A situation ripe for the coming of the hero. As usual he came. Or perhaps, the one who came had to be he. . . .

It was the end of June, and after two months of effort,

Frankie still sat among the beginners. She had developed a new trouble. She was able now to scratch desperately while the teacher dictated, almost keeping pace with her, but she could never afterward read what she had written. She was trying in vain to type a letter she had taken down, in which all she could distinguish was "Dear Sir:" and the "14th inst." when she heard someone sit down in the seat next her, which had till then been vacant. Naturally she glanced up. It was, as she later wrote to Minnie, a "real grown-up human being," a tall, thin fellow with a haughty, stupid face, a man who couldn't be under thirty and who was dressed in well-fitting and expensive clothes. She couldn't help staring at him, all the more because he took no notice of her at all. "He was so out of place there," she wrote. "He was so well-bred, with the nicest thin brown hands. And, my dear Minnie, he was even stupider than me. Much stupider."

She watched him a great deal, as he tried to write on his machine. The keyboard was hidden with a tin cover, so that he was obliged to learn the letters by memory; this puzzled and annoyed him, and he frowned severely over his chart.

"I say!" he said, suddenly, to Frances, with a marked English accent, "Isn't there something wrong about this thing? B ought to come next to A."

She explained that the keyboard wasn't arranged alphabetically. He asked why not, and she said she didn't know.

"Some American idea, I suppose," he observed, with displeasure, and turned away to resume his struggle.

He was not polite, he was certainly not clever, and, in spite of limpid and innocent grey eyes, not handsome; his nose was too large, his expression too contemptuous. Why then should Frances think him so terribly appealing and attractive? She felt an exaggerated good-will to-

ward him, an ardent wish to help him, even to comfort him. There was no obvious reason for this painful compassion; he was well-dressed, showed not the least trace of poverty, quite the contrary. He looked healthy too, although very thin. And he had very much the air of being satisfied with himself. Ridiculous girl!

He had come to the end of a line and not understanding the bell's signal, was trying to keep on writing. He saw that something was wrong, and he turned to Frances again. She had been watching him, and was ready to explain at once.

"I've never tried one of these infernal things before," he remarked, quite unnecessarily.

"I've been at it for two months," said Frances, with a sigh, "but I don't seem to get on. Not like the others."

He looked at her thoroughly for the first time.

"You're *not* like the others," he said, "that's probably why."

And added:

"You look like an English girl."

That meant that he was pleased, she knew.

"I'm not. I'm American—as far back as the Revolution."

"What revolution?" he asked.

With the characteristic innocence of her country-people, whose Genesis it is, she was astounded.

"Why, *our* Revolution! In 1776!" she explained.

He said "Really!" and went on with his writing.

The next night he saluted her with a stiff "Good evening!" directly she entered the room, so formal and frigid that her heart sank. They weren't friendly, then! But, after half an hour's desperate effort, he grew bored and discouraged, and once more turned his attention to the pretty girl.

"You're doing well," he observed.

Frances gave a sigh and smiled at him.

"I hate it!" she said.

"Rather! But why do you do it?"

"I want to get on—get a better job."

"What are you doing now?"

He was, she thought, very personal, but he didn't seem aware of it.

"I'm a secretary, for an authoress."

That seemed to interest him.

"I'd thought of something of that sort for myself," he said. "What do they expect of a secretary over here?"

"My position's rather peculiar," Frances told him. "I do all sorts of things that aren't really part of my duties."

"What, for instance? Can't you give me some sort of idea?" he persisted, and, half-laughing, she tried to tell him.

"Oh, I go shopping with her," she said, "and I listen while she reads, and I get up little chafing-dish suppers, and answer the telephone, and check up her bank book, and talk to her publishers, and—oh, well—lots of things like that!"

"I shouldn't call that a secretary," said the young man. "At home we'd call you a sort of companion."

Frances turned red, and began typing again. He *was* rude, and no mistake about it. Detestable! She worked violently for a time, then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of him, pecking away at his typewriter so slowly and stupidly that her heart smote her.

"Good night!" she said cheerfully when the gong sounded, and she went off to the dictation class and he to the beginner's room, where she could see him through the open door, writing on the arm of his chair, surrounded by eager children.

III

Frances was a little late the next night, and from her locker in the corridor, she looked anxiously into the classroom for the young Englishman's nice brown head bent over his machine. But he wasn't there. She went to her place and began to work half-heartedly, with one eye on the door, watching for him. The clock ticked on and on, half an hour gone, still she couldn't believe he wasn't coming. The whole long hour passed, the typing lesson was finished, and he hadn't come.

Disappointment out of all proportion assailed her. Her heart was like lead, the whole world blank.

"What a fool I am!" she told herself. "Why on earth should I care? I don't really; it's only that he's the only other possible person in the place—— Why should he come? Of course he's given up the whole thing in disgust. *Of course* he's not coming back, at all. Ever. Of course I shan't see him again. What difference does it make?"

And yet, in spite of all this excellent common-sense, that feeling of desolation persisted. She hated and loathed the silly school, made up her mind to stop coming. She sat in the shorthand class, scratching down her unintelligible little symbols——

Suddenly an awful thought swept over her. It grew rapidly to a conviction. He had certainly stayed away solely because of her, because she had been so preposterously over-friendly that he was disgusted and alarmed. She did wish that she might see him once more, just to tell him that she didn't like him, not him, personally; simply, like all nice Americans, she had wanted to be kind to a stranger. . . .

She rushed out the minute the class was over. She was very anxious to get home. And there he was, waiting for her, standing under a street lamp where the light streamed on his arrogant face, a slim, foppish figure,

with a walking stick. She felt suddenly angry at him; replied with coldness to his greeting.

"It was such a nice evening," he said, "I couldn't stand that filthy place."

It was; sweet, calm, fresh, with a bright little moon overhead.

"I thought perhaps you'd like to walk a bit," he said, "if you're not tired."

She hesitated imperceptibly, then accepted.

"A few blocks," she said. "I shouldn't like to be late."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked presently.

Frances said she didn't, and they began strolling, quite aimlessly, uptown.

"I say!" he exclaimed, "It's very decent of you to come. You Americans *are* unconventional, aren't you?"

"Not all of us," said Frances drily.

"We're different. We won't have anything to do with a stranger till we've got his credentials. I dare say we're over-particular. No English girl I've ever met would take up a man this way——"

"I'm not in the habit of it," said Frances. She was affronted and angry. "But I'm not a child. I'm accustomed to—to forming my own judgments. I—as far as I could judge, you were a gentleman. I thought you'd quite understand——"

"I *do*!" he protested, "I do, absolutely. I only wanted to tell you that I like it—all this freedom, you know. An English girl of your class would be so—so much more prudent——"

"I'm not imprudent!" cried Frances, passionately.

"Ah, but you are, though. My dear young lady, you don't even know my name."

"Well, what is it, then?" she asked, half-laughing, half-furious. "You'd better tell me, if that will make this shocking walk more 'prudent.'"

"Lionel Naylor," he said.

"Haven't you any letters, any papers, to identify yourself? How can I tell if that's really your name?"

He replied with perfect seriousness:

"I've one or two things—a letter——"

"Oh, nonsense! Couldn't you see that I was joking? Why on earth should I care *who* you are? I'm old enough and sufficiently intelligent to find out very soon *what* you are. I'm not afraid of strange men. I can take care of myself."

"It does no harm for a girl to be careful," he answered, stubbornly.

And that was, apparently, his final word. They went on in silence. Frances counted fifteen blocks without a word. At the first crossing he had rather ceremoniously taken her arm, and he didn't release it. He seemed quite contented to go on forever in this way. But it provoked Frances beyond measure. She longed to say to him:

"Why did you ask me to take a walk, if you didn't want to speak to me?"

She made up her mind that she wouldn't speak first, no matter how long it was. She had to, though. She looked at her watch.

"I'm afraid I'll have to turn back now," she said. "It's time I was home."

"I say!" he cried. "That's too bad! I wanted to have a talk with you."

"Why didn't you talk then?" she asked, sharply, and he answered with equal irritability:

"My dear young lady, I can't plunge into things the way you people do. I have to collect my thoughts a bit——"

"Strange as it may seem to you," said Frances, "all the people in this country are not exactly alike."

It began to dawn upon him that she was really annoyed, that these people were possibly as sensitive to offence as himself. Instantly he was very sorry.

"I dare say I'm not very tactful," he said, "I didn't mean to be offensive, though, I assure you. I admire you people very much."

"*All* of us?"

He laughed.

"There are some, of course. . . . My sister-in-law—She! . . ."

"She's an American?"

"Yes. My brother lives over here, you know. Been here some time. We thought he was a confirmed bachelor. Practically certain not to marry. Then, the very day after I got here, he did it. And such a girl! Of course it made trouble at once."

Frances was interested, and moreover, she could see that he wanted to talk about it.

"How?" she asked.

"Set my brother against me. Put all sorts of beastly—Am—beastly ideas into his head. She has no use for a man unless he's eternally stewing over a row of figures, grubbing after money. So now he's got this idiotic idea of my learning this typing and shorthand rot. And why? So I can get a job in his office. I never heard such silly rot. What earthly use is that stuff going to be? I shan't be one of his clerks. It's *her* idea. She wants to humiliate me."

Frances murmured something sympathetic.

"What business were you in before?" she asked.

"Not in any business," he replied, surprised. "Didn't you understand? I suppose, according to *your* ideas, I'm no good. I've never done anything much. Just stopped at home while my mother was alive. . . . Until two years ago . . . when she died. She—liked to have me at home. We got on together very well."

He was rather pathetically anxious to be friendly and communicative now, to show her that he wasn't aloof and condescending. He tried to tell her about himself, in-

directly to present his credentials. And did so, far more fully than he imagined. With every word, spoken and unspoken, she was more certain that she had not been mistaken—that he was “nice,” that he was to be trusted, that he was mysteriously likable.

“We travelled, and so on,” he continued. “She liked that. . . . Do you know, when I look at this girl Horace has married, I’m glad—really glad, the poor old mater—isn’t here.”

Then, unfortunately, he got started on a very favourite topic; he told her what he had endured from “that girl”; how she sneered at him, persecuted him, was continually poisoning his brother’s mind against him. Frances listened with a heavy heart. She couldn’t approve of this! It wasn’t manly; it wasn’t fine. She pitied him, yearned over him, and at the same time felt a passionate Defoe desire to lecture him, to tell him he was wrong, didn’t see things in a proper light. She wanted to tell him what to do and offer to help him to do it.

Conversation about his sister-in-law lasted until they had reached Frankie’s door. Then he was once more surprised and regretful that he hadn’t made better use of his time. He took Frankie’s proffered hand warmly.

“You see,” he said, “I didn’t ask *your* name. It wasn’t necessary.”

“Do you know it?” she asked, a little puzzled.

“No, not that. Simply, I don’t need any credentials to know that you’re—absolutely—all right. Absolutely.”

She smiled at him maternally. She liked that clumsy compliment; she liked his naïveness, his simplicity, even his rudeness. She saw him no longer as a young man, but as a boy, who had been badly trained, a rather spoilt boy. She felt very peaceful, very kindly, toward him and toward everyone else. She had never known life to be so satisfying as it was that evening, for no reason at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

HE was there, the next evening, and welcomed her as an old friend; in fact, he talked so much that she grew uneasy.

"We'd better work a little," she said. "Wouldn't it be awful if a teacher should come and scold us—at our age!"

"What I particularly want to ask," he said, "is, if you'd come down to Brighton Beach to-morrow? I'll run you down in Horace's motor. We'll have lunch and a swim and get back early. Will that be all right?"

"I'd love it," she answered, "but I don't know whether Miss E. could spare me. I'll ask her."

"Perhaps if I came home with you this evening, it would look better. So that she can see what sort of chap I am. I could stop in for a moment, couldn't I?"

"Yes," Frances answered, doubtfully, "but—I suppose so . . . but I'll have to explain a little in advance. There's a young German who comes every evening to see her, and you're sure to find him there."

"Every evening, eh?"

"Yes; he's her cousin."

He frowned over this; asked a number of questions.

"Are you sure she's all right?" he demanded. "You can't be too careful, you know."

"Oh, yes!" Frances asserted, positively, although she was far from sure that he would think so.

"I'll certainly stop in this evening," he said. "I want to see for myself."

"I don't think you'd better," she said, reluctantly, "Miss E.'s awfully queer, eccentric, you know. She mightn't like it."

"But I want to see her," he insisted. "She surely can't object to my stopping in for half a minute. You're not a servant."

"It's not that——"

"I want to see for myself," he repeated. "It may not be a suitable place for you at all. I'd know at once."

His attitude, his air of protection, delighted Frankie while it annoyed her. She was so firmly convinced that she could take care of herself, so jealous of her freedom, that she didn't want even advice. And still couldn't help being very much pleased by this wholly masculine gesture.

In the end she agreed. And was at once sorry and wretched, going through her classes in a nightmare of worry. How would Miss Eppendorfer take it? What would she think of Frankie's walking in, uninvited, unpermitted, with a strange man? And how to explain him? Now she was ready to confess herself imprudent. She would have given anything she owned if something would have prevented Mr. Naylor from coming.

He, of course, was perfectly unruffled, as anyone conscious of such superiority would be. He followed Frances into the little Mission sitting-room where Miss Eppendorfer and Mr. Hassler were smoking side by side on the sofa. Frances was bitterly embarrassed; for a minute she couldn't speak at all. She saw them both staring at her in amazement.

"I've brought my friend, Mr. Naylor, in for a few minutes," she said, in a strained, artificial sort of voice. "We——"

Nothing more came; the girl who could always take care of herself couldn't account for her visitor.

"We met at the business school," said Naylor, "and as we were more or less the only human beings there, we naturally had to be friends."

At the sound of his careless voice, Miss Eppendorfer's look of amazement died away. She got up and shook hands with him, presented him to Kurt, and asked him to sit down. She was like a good servant; she knew class when she saw it.

Never before had Frances realised how distinguished her Mr. Naylor was until she saw him in Miss Eppendorfer's sitting-room. She saw the authoress inspecting him in her detailed and unabashed way, staring at him, computing the cost of his clothes, comprehending the high degree he possessed of what she called "style," and so greatly admired. She was deeply impressed.

He was very gallant to the poor thing, which delighted her beyond measure. No denying that she made a fool of herself. She was coy, imperious, more youthful than she had ever dared to be with Kurt, and, no matter how preposterous her behaviour, Mr. Naylor didn't once attempt to catch Frankie's eye, never encouraged her to be more preposterous.

Poor Miss Eppendorfer! Frankie, watching her, reflected on her ingratiating servility toward Mr. Hassler and her present conduct with Mr. Naylor, and found it impossible to reconcile all this with the Miss Eppendorfer she knew. Could it be the same woman who often talked to her with sense, with cynical shrewdness, with sharp knowledge of the world? The same woman who wrote books and sold them, knew how to make money and how to invest it? At the sound of a man's voice she was horribly bewitched, even her face lost its look of worn good nature and took on a false and stupid simper. It hurt Frances, she was genuinely grateful to Mr. Naylor for not sneering.

But the baleful eye of the young German was fixed upon him. He was forced to sit in silence and listen to their badinage, and it infuriated him. He broke in suddenly, in a harsh, high voice:

"You are in business here?"

Mr. Naylor turned toward him, looked at him, and hated him.

"No," he said.

"Perhaps you are looking for an opening?"

"No; there's an 'opening' for me when I'm ready for it," he answered haughtily.

"It should not be at all difficult to find an opening in this country. The requirements are so small," Mr. Hassler announced, with tact. "Here they will willingly employ a man who knows nothing. Even hard work they don't expect. With us in Germany all is very different. It is necessary to work very hard. We are all trained to work very hard. A young fellow starting in business with us would never ask, 'What are the hours?' Certainly not. We realise that you have got to work very hard, in order to get somewhere."

"We don't need to work so hard in England," said Mr. Naylor. "We *are* somewhere."

"Yes, where!" cried the other, raising his voice.

"Where you'd like to be," Mr. Naylor replied with a smile.

"Bah! You're getting left behind. We're beating you everywhere, in every line. Your British trade—where will it be in ten years' time?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. I'm not in trade. But I'm not worried. I dare say we'll still be on the map."

Mr. Hassler's excitement carried him away.

"Yes, you'll be on the map!" he shouted, "as a German Provinz. We'll stamp out a little of that damn arrogance."

"I say, are you trying to be funny?"

"That damned British arrogance," he went on, at the top of his voice. "You half-educated, half-trained, half-alive nation of money-greedy *pigs*——"

"I say!" cried Mr. Naylor again, puzzled and angry, "You're going a bit too far!"

"PIGS!" shouted the young German.

Naylor sprang to his feet, as white with anger as the other was red; he was on the point of speaking when Frances caught his arm.

"Oh, please!" she entreated, and suddenly and helplessly, began to laugh.

"Oh, why do Germans always call people pigs!" she cried.

They all looked at her, and under their surprised glance, she struggled for self-control and gained it. She looked down at the ground, her mouth still quivering, and kept very still.

"As for *you*——" began Mr. Hassler, and then stopped.

"Now! Now!" begged Miss Eppendorfer, in terrible distress, "Now, gentlemen! . . . What about some nice cold beer?"

She was afraid, though, to fetch it and leave the men alone; she was afraid also to ask Frances, not knowing whether or not she considered herself insulted in the person of her guest. She stood nervously smiling, her eyes on her cousin, mutely beseeching him to be placated by beer. At last Frances took pity on her, and went herself to get the stuff. But Mr. Naylor declined.

"Thanks," he said, stiff and outraged, "I'll be going."

"Pshaw!" muttered Mr. Hassler, who stood at the window with his back turned ostentatiously.

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Naylor, crisply.

"Pshaw!" the other repeated, somewhat louder.

With a very obvious effort the young Englishman said nothing to this; he took his hat, and with a hasty hand-

clasp for Frankie and a bow for Miss Eppendorfer, took himself off.

Frankie went into her own room and tried to compose herself by reading, but not for long. Almost immediately the front door slammed and Miss Eppendorfer came into her room like a whirlwind.

"There! You see!" she screamed. "You miserable creature! He's gone! He's gone!"

Frances looked at her severely.

"You've spoiled everything!" she went on. "How did you dare to laugh at him? What right have you to laugh at him! You're nothing better than a servant. And he belongs to one of the finest families in Hamburg. His father's worth nearly half a million. He's been through Heidelberg. And you dare to laugh at him! Who are you, anyway? A big, gawky fool of a girl. . . . Picking up a man in the street and bringing him into my house. . . . He's shocked at you."

And so on, in the strain that so sickened and dismayed Frances.

"He laughs at you. He says you're a clumsy, ignorant——" . . . All manner of dirty insolence.

The heart of the trouble was there, that Frances had laughed at him. He could forget his anger against the Englishman, but he could not stomach being laughed at by a pretty girl. He had said horrible things about her, which Miss Eppendorfer had treasured up and now repeated, with greater malice because she dimly perceived that in his hatred for Frances there was more than a little lust.

Against this attack Frances was defenceless. There was nothing in her nature, nothing in her training, to arm her. She stood up very straight, very proud, but tears were running down her cheeks. She waited until every one of the dreadful words had been said, and the speaker had flung out of the room, then she set to work

to pack her little trunk with furious energy, cramming everything in, wishing only to be gone forever from that place. In hat and jacket, she went out into the hall and telephoned for a taxi.

The driver came up after her trunk; he was just dragging it along the hall to put it into the lift, when Miss Eppendorfer came rushing out, in a kimono, her face raddled and tear-blistered, her wisps of hair in a wild tangle.

"No! No!" she screamed. "Stop! Frances!"

Her voice reverberated shockingly in the stone corridor. The lift boy and the chauffeur stared at her. Frances felt ready to faint.

"Frances! Come back and let me explain!"

"I can't!" said Frances in a low voice. "Please don't make such a noise!"

"Come back! I can't let you go like this! I didn't mean what I said! You know I didn't!"

Already the doors of two apartments had stealthily opened.

"Oh, please hush!" entreated Frances. "I can't come back. I'll write."

Suddenly Miss Eppendorfer turned to the two men.

"Can't *you* beg this hard-hearted girl not to leave me like this, without a chance to explain?" she sobbed, in a torrent of tears. "Can't you say a word for me? I'm alone in the world. I haven't——"

"Hush!" commanded Frances. "I'll come! Please take the trunk in again."

When the front door was closed Miss Eppendorfer flung her arms about Frances.

"I know you can't forgive me," she moaned. "But, oh Frances! . . . You don't know what love is! You don't know how I love that man! I know I'm a fool, but I can't help it. Oh, Frances, just stand by me till it's over."

"I don't understand you. I thought you were going to marry him——"

"No! No! Never! . . . Only stand by me till I get over it. It won't last. He'll go away soon. It's madness; I know it. But you don't *know* how I suffer. I can't help myself. Oh, Frances, you're so cool and reasonable, you don't *know*!"

The flood of her confession was not to be dammed. Frances had to hear it all and to learn its lesson, as well as her unready mind permitted. And all the time she listened, in shame, pity and disgust, her adventuring spirit was eagerly and thirstily drinking this new knowledge, this experience, precious even if vicarious.

She really understood very little of it. Miss Eppendorfer, although protesting constantly how she "loved" Kurt, seemed actually to display more hate than affection. She bore him a bitter grudge for this "love." She was full of stories of his sneers, his taunts; how he had pulled the pins out of her hair and then laughed himself sick at the bleached and scanty locks. How he compared her to other women whom he had seen in the course of the day; how he had asked her to sing, and then mocked her. How he wasted her money and forever demanded more. She knew that he ridiculed her to his friends. He encouraged her to drink and then got her to sign cheques. . . .

The end of her recital left her stripped of all decency, all honour, showed her a weak fool destroyed by a vice, something to shudder at: yet her honesty, her lack of self-justification, the eternal and naked humanness in it all, touched even the fastidious young girl.

"This awful thing is *I*!" the woman seemed to say. "This is my soul. May God help me, and Man pity me!"

Frances sat beside her till she fell asleep, wiser, kinder, better than she had ever been before.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

MR. NAYLOR telephoned the next morning.

"I'm waiting downstairs in the hall," he said. "I don't care to come up."

Frances hurried into her hat and jacket and went down. She got into the motor-car beside him, indescribably relieved to get away from the flat for a while. She looked at him with a smile.

"Well!" she said.

"Well!" he repeated. "Upon my word, that was a jolly little party last night! That German chap!"

"You don't know how sorry I felt, bringing that on you. But, of course, I never imagined——"

"You know, though, it's no place for you, Miss Defoe. That woman's not——"

"Please! You really can't understand her as I do. She—really, she's. . . ."

She stopped, at a loss, but quite determined to protect the poor wretch who had begged for pity the night before.

"She has so many good points," she went on, "Oh, I'm not quite an idiot, Mr. Naylor. . . . I see her as she is. Only—I'd rather dwell on her good qualities. She's been very kind to me."

Not for worlds would she have told anyone of the two dreadful scenes. She enlarged on Miss Eppendorfer's friendliness and good humour and the excellence of her work.

"That's all very well," said he, "but I stick to it that it's no place for *you*."

They didn't talk much more on the way down; Mr. Naylor was too much occupied with his driving, which was minutely careful. He took no risks, and he muttered furiously against those who did. He seemed to Frankie unnecessarily prudent; she would have liked to go faster, as lots of other cars did. However, a look at his frowning face reproved her; she felt that this driving business must be more difficult, more perilous than her inexperience imagined.

As soon as they reached the beach he proposed taking their swim at once, and she very readily agreed. Poor girl! She hadn't been in the sea for years, since those long gone days, those happy days when she had been a school-girl. She was, it must be admitted, rather eager to "show off" to her Englishman, for she was a good swimmer, and not at all an unpleasant object in a bathing suit. She came out of her bath-house and walked down on to the beach, conscious of her splendid symmetry, her strong, straight limbs, her face gay and boyish under a tight rubber cap. It was obvious to both of them at once that Mr. Naylor was physically not at all her equal. Gone his chic, his superiority; he was thin, fragile, rather wretched. Within her stirred faintly an old, old instinct, perverted and crushed out through generations of false training, the instinct of the woman to seek for strength and beauty in her mate. Her smile was artificial.

"Beastly cold!" he grumbled.

But Frances dashed by him, through the breakers, and began swimming out in strong and beautiful strokes, her bare arms flashing up rhythmically, her white teeth showing in a broad smile. She looked back, and saw Mr. Naylor moving slowly near the shore; after ten minutes

or so he came out on to the sand, and lay in the sun watching her. And presently began to wave.

She came inshore reluctantly.

"What is it?" she asked. "It's glorious in the water to-day. I never want to come out!"

"It's time to come out now," he said.

"Oh, it can't be! I'll *have* to stop longer!"

"But, I say, I want my lunch. This isn't much of a lark for me, you know, roasting out here like this."

"Why don't you go back into the water again?"

"I can't. It gives me a chill."

"A chill!" said Frances, and couldn't keep a faint contempt out of her voice. "You'd better go and dress. I'll be out presently."

"I shouldn't think of leaving you; you're so rash. Go ahead, enjoy yourself; I'll wait."

His good nature conquered Frances; she gave one more look at the glittering sea and went back into her bath-house.

She had to wait quite twenty minutes for him.

"You're quick, aren't you?" he said, artlessly.

"Or is it that you're slow?" she returned. Now he was his own self again, the imperturbable, the superior. She wished to forget the shivering, frail being who had for a time supplanted him.

He ordered an amazing lunch, in the old "Oriental," which was still standing then, with its unique flavour; he saw people whom he knew by sight and could point out to Frankie. He ordered champagne, which she had never before tasted. He was like a prince, or rather, like a millionaire. . . .

After this meal, which was nothing less than a banquet, Frances said she would have to go home.

"The awful cook's gone out," she explained, "and I'll have to help poor Miss E. to get something ready."

"What!" he cried. "Do you mean to tell me you're going to *cook*!"

"And eat," she answered, cheerfully. "Please don't be mediæval."

"I don't like it. A girl of your class—and your ability——"

They were spinning along the road by the marshes, passed by an incessant stream of motors going down.

"It's a confounded shame to go home now anyway," he said. "If we could only have had the evening!"

"Another time," she said, before she thought, and was rather confused at her own forwardness.

"I hope so," he answered gravely, "I can't tell you how much I—like to be with you. I—altogether—I've never met anyone like you. . . . I'm very anxious for old Horace to see you. . . . Do you suppose you could meet him some time? Without his wife, I mean? It's irregular, I know, but you're not conventional."

She said no, that she wasn't.

"Could you set a time? Next Wednesday?"

And she said she thought that would do.

II

"You don't mind if I go out to tea on Wednesday, do you?" Frances asked Miss Eppendorfer the next morning.

"Not a bit!" said she, cheerfully. "I like to see you enjoy yourself like a human being. Is it your English friend?"

"Yes. The only trouble is, I haven't a thing fit to wear, and it's at a hotel," she said. "Couldn't you come down town with me and help me pick out something?"

Miss Eppendorfer was only too pleased; it was one of her good days and she was cheerful and energetic.

She led Frances from shop to shop, imperiously rejecting every suggestion.

"I know what suits you," she insisted, "I'm a wonderful judge of value, too. You leave it all to me."

At last she was pleased by a grey broadcloth suit.

"Oh, yes!" cried Frankie, ironically. "A hundred and fifty dollars is just what I always pay!"

"I'm going to get it for you."

"Oh, no, I couldn't!" she protested, shocked.

"You must. To make up for all I said that night," whispered the authoress. "Be generous, Frances! Don't be petty!"

She allowed herself to be persuaded, accepted the suit and with it a new hat and blouse. She felt guilty and ashamed and yet delighted. She was so very anxious to make a favourable impression on this brother Horace.

She started off, very nervous and still more ashamed. The whole exploit seemed wrong, meeting the man without his wife, and wearing clothes she could never have bought for herself. . . . It was common.

"Cheap," she reflected.

But Horace would have made a supper-club respectable. They were waiting in the corridor; she saw *her* Mr. Naylor at once though he didn't see her; slender and drooping, quietly conscious of his impeccable British elegance, he was watching the wrong door. Near him was a heavy, bull-necked, red-faced man with a black moustache and melancholy, bilious eyes, who smoked a big cigar and stared nowhere. This was Horace.

He surprised Frances by his lack of everything that pleased her in his brother. He was altogether the merchant, not a hint of the man-of-the-world. He shook hands with her and smiled, but it was a sad, dull smile. He was distraught, and couldn't conceal it.

"Well," he said, with a sigh, "Lead the way, Lionel, my boy!"

They entered an engaging little tea-room with shaded lamps and sofas. Lionel took charge of everything, chose a table, and ordered the cocktails, but the management of the conversation was evidently beyond him. There was a long and awkward silence, while the drinks were coming. No one looked at either of the others.

It was Horace who first revived, after two cocktails.

"Well," he observed again, "He's a handful. You'll have to keep an eye on him, *I* can tell you."

Frances was startled; was he talking to her? . . . She looked up and caught his gaze, melancholy and kindly, fixed on her.

"You'll have all you can manage, with *him*," he continued.

She was alarmed and confused. It wasn't possible that he thought . . . And yet, very evidently, he did think so, for he went on, with a sort of gloomy archness:

"I hope he won't be too much for you."

She was anxious to refute the suggestion of any responsibility for Lionel, to tell this brother, subtly and politely, but unmistakably, that he misread the situation. But she could not, on the spur of the moment, think of anything that would do.

"I don't really know Mr. Naylor very well," she attempted.

Horace smiled.

"Plenty of time!" he said.

And this time his glance wandered to his brother, and was curiously altered, rested upon that futile young face with limitless fidelity and affection——

"Yes," he said again, fatuously, "You'll have your hands full."

Frances had a horrible feeling of being caught in a net.

"I'm afraid I can't undertake such a responsibility," she said, with a sickly smile.

Horace smiled indulgently at her. After a third cocktail, he was becoming a little garrulous on the subject of his brother; partly because he thought it would interest Frankie and partly because it was his great topic anyway. His pride in his brother was rather surprising to Frankie; she couldn't know, of course, from what a stodgy, obscure family this charming irresponsibility had sprung, couldn't imagine how audacious his extravagances appeared, how remarkable his social progress; in fine, she couldn't see him as a Naylor.

It was not until much later that she divined something of the relations between these two. Sons of a well-to-do manufacturer, they had both "received advantages" in the way of education and so forth, but while Horace remained immutably the son of a wealthy manufacturer who had had "advantages," Lionel in some mysterious way, not unusual in this world, had turned out to be aristocratic, elegant, fashionable. His brother took a naïve pride in this; he admired Lionel as he did royalty, not very useful, but immensely valuable in his place. He never urged him to go into business; he was quite satisfied that he should go his own dazzling way. For Horace was not the classic business man of stage and story, who despises and berates the idler; he was something much newer, the money-maker who is apologetic and secretly bewildered; who feels called upon to justify his activity. Lionel was what he would have liked to be, only that he knew it to be impossible. He acknowledged that they were of different clay.

He told Frankie how Lionel had no idea of time, and was always late.

How he kept the most exclusive people waiting for him and never had a proper excuse.

How he spent preposterous sums on handkerchiefs, his hobby.

How altogether idle and rude and popular he had been "at home."

In spite of her common-sense, Frankie began to feel that the attentions of such a man were something to boast of, to treasure. He wasn't rude to her, ever.

After a fourth cocktail and a minute sardine sandwich, Horace said he was obliged to go.

"Au revoir!" he said to Frankie, with a very bad accent. "If this boy gives you any trouble, you let me know, eh?"

He clasped her hand in his warm, moist one with genuine good-will, slapped Lionel on the shoulder, and went out, edging his way clumsily among the little low tables.

Lionel gave a sigh of comfort, and leaned across the table.

"May I have another cup?" he asked.

Frances was looking at him sternly.

"Mr. Naylor!" she said, "You have given your brother a false impression."

He was startled.

"I . . . so it seems," he said, weakly, "I . . . he *does* seem . . ."

"It isn't fair," she went on, "I'm surprised at you! What could *I* do? Or say? Mr. Naylor, really, it was *not* right of you!"

"I know it. . . . But I give you my word I never exactly said—anything. I dare say I was—oh, enthusiastic. . . . I suppose he drew his own conclusions."

He went on, after a pause:

"I did talk a lot about you. . . . You see——"

He tapped his cigarette nervously on his plate.

"I say!" he said. "Couldn't it be true, you know?"

She understood him well enough, and a bright colour surged into her face.

"What?" she asked, disingenuously.

"I mean—what Horace thinks. . . . I mean—do you think you *could*——"

She faltered.

"I don't know. . . . It's been such a short time——"

"You know that doesn't matter. Time! Why, the first minute I saw you, there in that beastly school, I knew I was done for. You looked so lovely and so dignified. Such a lady. Just the sort of girl I'd always thought about. My lovely girl! My dear, beautiful girl!"

For some reason her eyes filled with tears. His voice touched her so, moved her so profoundly. She couldn't pretend, couldn't hesitate. Because *she* knew, too, perfectly well. She looked up at him with a trembling smile.

"It's silly!" she said. "We don't know each other."

"I know *you*, darling, as well as if I'd seen you every day for a year."

"But, really, we must be sensible," she said, seriously. "We'll have to wait—not commit ourselves to anything definite. We'll be friends——"

"Not I! I *want* to commit myself as much as possible. Won't you commit yourself just a little bit, darling girl? Just go so far as to say you *like* me?"

"You know I like you," she said, smiling.

He could laugh now, tease her; he knew she was won.

They left the tea-room and began to stroll down Fifth Avenue. And at every crossing he took her arm and their eyes met, and a ridiculous and passionate happiness filled them both.

"My girl!" he whispered.

Frances was almost ashamed of being so happy; she was anxious to appear practical and reasonable. She said she had shopping to do, and that Lionel might come with her, if he liked. He insisted upon augmenting her little purchases, choosing very expensive things, and things he had realised she wanted. In spite of her independence, all this was delightful to her; she hesitated, refused, accepted. . . .

A shop girl looked after them, was amused at their long, long glances and their unwarranted smiles: she thought them a well-matched couple, both so tall and so nice-looking and so well-bred. And she was very right; they were well-matched, by God Himself, Who had filled Lionel's need of a strong and sober and honest lover, who had given to Frankie the gay and careless companion her heart required, the clinging and exigent affection she could so well support. Lionel had the power to soften the touch of austerity latent in her, the hint of priggishness; she had the nobility and the resoluteness which he needed as an example, a stimulus to his plastic soul. They had, in each other's company, a sense of absolute completeness and satisfaction; they knew that this love was altogether *right*.

Frances inspected the new pocketbook he had bought her, so unnecessarily and unsuitably costly, and then again at Lionel's happy face. And she would have liked to cry out what she and all women know enough to conceal:

"Oh, my love, I want to protect you, to care for you, to shield your raw pride, forever and ever to stand between you and the world!"

And that mustn't be said. She knew she must call his weakness strength, or she would destroy him. No man must ever see his true self mirrored in a woman's eyes. He could not endure it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I

"BUT don't worry, my dearest girl!" said Lionel.

"I can't help it," said Frances. "It's such a waste. We could just as well take a train. Or anyway the taxi needn't wait. We could always find another."

They were on the veranda of a hotel at Long Beach, on a Sunday afternoon, part of the crowd that Lionel liked so much.

"We might not," he said. "There's such a mob here. Better take no chances. As for the train—no, thanks! Now, do be a nice kid, and not scold me. Don't you want me to have *any* pleasures at all?"

"That's not the question. Oh, Lionel, we could have just as nice a time without being so dreadfully wasteful. It's . . . why, Lionel, it's *mad!*"

She had a genuine dislike for extravagance and frivolity. Old traditions from remote Defoe ancestors urged her always toward prudence and restraint. She really couldn't enter into Lionel's mood, couldn't for a moment be careless, and would never pretend to be. She wanted dignity and purpose; she was fond enough of fun, but it wasn't his kind. She could not enjoy watching other people spend money. Lionel didn't care to swim, or to walk; he was quite happy to sit on a crowded veranda, drinking cocktails and chaffing his serious girl. He was happy now, in watching the streams of people going in and out of the hotel, over-dressed, over-perfumed, over-fed, over-stimulated. But there was nothing here for Frankie.

All this life that Lionel had pulled her into distressed her. He had urged her to give up her business course, and instead they went out somewhere every evening. Miss Eppendorfer was always ready to let her go, as long as she wasn't left alone. She absolutely approved of Lionel. From her point of view, he was the ideal lover, attractive and lavish. He was continually bringing presents to Frankie, flowers, chocolates and books. He refused to believe that she was not very fond of sweets, and was deaf to her hints that her taste in reading was not his. She felt like a prig, a bluestocking, with her perpetual advice and rebuke. Her serious soul was in revolt against this waste of time; often when they were at some blatant cabaret, she would be longing for her quiet room and a good book. She was really weary of this ceaseless pleasure-hunt, disgusted, and yet hadn't the heart to deny his pleasures to Lionel. He never read a book, and was no more capable or desirous of quiet than a small boy.

She took it for granted that he was more or less a rich man, and that as his wife she would be obliged to endure a good deal of this sort of existence. She did ask him, though, if he wouldn't just as soon live out of town, and he said, whatever she liked. So she was able to picture herself in one of those charming suburban houses on the Sound, with a fine garden, and horses, and dogs. And undoubtedly children; lovely, happy children.

He had started to work in his brother's office, which pleased Frankie, for she had the American woman's dislike for an unoccupied man. He said he was doing well, and talked of an early marriage. But that, too, was against Frankie's principles. She wanted to wait, not because she wasn't sure of herself or of him, but because a hasty marriage appeared somehow indecent to her. She even refused to tell her own people.

"Wait till I've known you a little longer," she said.

Taken all in all, this "being engaged" was not what Frankie had expected, was by no means the happiest time of her life, as she had always been told it would be. With Lionel, *per se*, she could find no fault. If he had been made to order for a Defoe he could not have been more satisfactory. He was almost like a brother in his manner, never too ardent, too pressing, or in any way offending her squeamishness. It was for this she really adored him, for his delicacy and genuine kindness. She was too ignorant fully to appreciate it; she was simply vaguely thankful that he was not like "some men" of whom she had read and heard.

Moreover, she had a little of Horace's absurd admiration for Lionel's social graces. All the solid, substantial, serious people in the world have it, this irrational and somewhat pathetic regard for the others, the spenders, the wasters, the ones who refuse to conform to their righteous code, the gay and audacious good-for-nothings. She knew that she wouldn't have *dared* to do as he did, live after his style. Sometimes she had misgivings, fancied her ideas for the future were sordid and petty, her hope for an orderly, self-respecting sort of existence, the house in the suburbs, with books and lectures and intellectual friends. . . . An existence that had no place for the poor fellow's febrile excitements.

Characteristically she got Lionel into the picture by assuring herself that he would change.

II

There came one day a careless little note, scrawled in huge letters on a bizarre card with a purple and gold monogram:

"Won't you come for dinner on Thursday?"

"JULIE NAYLOR."

Lionel explained it to her when he arrived that evening.

"Horace made her," he said. "If she had her own way, I don't think she'd ever ask a woman into the house. Of course she's out of the question. Impossible. But for Horace's sake, I wish you'd come. He's a decent old boy. And he likes you. Thought you were the prettiest thing he's seen—— You'll go, won't you?"

Upon reflection, it seemed the correct thing to do, and she consented.

Miss Eppendorfer helped her to get ready on the very important evening. She took the greatest interest in the whole affair, was very arch about it. Frances persisted in her "nothing really settled yet," but Miss Eppendorfer refused to believe it.

"Oh, I know all about such things!" she said.

This evening was to mark the end of the feeble pretence, anyway. Lionel came for her a little early, and Miss Eppendorfer undertook to entertain him until Frankie was ready. She heard them talking gaily together, in their usual vein of preposterous flirtation. She surmised the customary brandy and soda, and she felt her invariable shade of annoyance at their *camaraderie*. If Lionel would only be—not condescending of course, but—oh, a little more——

An unusually loud shriek from the authoress startled her.

"Oh, you extravagant boy! What a *beauty*! What a perfect beauty!"

She hurried a bit then, and entered the room, looking her very best and loveliest, dignified, concealing her curiosity. They were on the sofa side by side, a little table before them holding the siphon and the brandy bottle, their heads together over something in the

authoress's hand. Directly she saw Frankie, she thrust the thing back at Lionel.

"*You* must show it to her!" she cried, in great excitement.

Lionel extended his hand, proffered her her ring——

It was the conventional single diamond, set in platinum, a stone so pure and beautiful and of such a size that Frances almost gasped. Her face showed no pleasure at first, nothing but blank dismay. She barely stopped herself in time from saying:

"But oh, how terribly expensive!"

He put it on her finger, and she smiled in duty bound. But secretly it terrified her. It was so much too splendid. Perhaps she had a premonition that it was an unlucky ring——

Lionel was disappointed. He looked into Frankie's face as they sat in the taxi, and waited for her to praise it.

"Don't you like it?" he asked, at last, as she said nothing.

"Oh, yes, dear," she answered, touched by his wistful tone, and, as she very rarely did, kissed him. "It's beautiful. *Too* beautiful!"

III

Horace lived in an overwhelmingly grand apartment house on Riverside Drive. His private door was opened by a man servant, and Frances was conducted to a boudoir where a French maid waited to assist her. She was a little nervous at the unexpectedly sumptuous tone of the establishment; she wasn't accustomed to rich people. She dreaded meeting the mistress of such a household, not only on account of the unfavourable reports she had had from Lionel, but also on account of her richness. A most ignoble awe, from which no living

soul is immune. . . . It might be too that she felt a warning shudder, could divine the shadow of the pain she was to suffer here. She never again entered that house, but she remembered always every detail of what she had seen there. It was the setting, the stage of such an unforgettably bitter scene.

She was glad to find Horace alone, although she was not pleased by her hostess's delay. He was in the "library," a panelled room, dimly and richly lighted by Oriental lamps and crowded with massive furniture. (She didn't see *any* books.) He was very cordial and kind, though melancholy. He apologised for Julie.

"She was late getting in," he explained, "and it takes her the deuce of a time to get herself ready."

It certainly did, for it was quite half an hour more before she appeared.

"I'm sorry, people!" she cried, running into the room, and swept them all with a smile.

This Julie, the impossible, the cruel, the vulgar! This sparkling lovely thing, with her piquant dark face and the figure of a nymph! Frances found it hard to believe. . . . Except that she was over-dressed, in a glittering sort of ball gown, and that her voice was not at all agreeable.

"I shouldn't call her 'impossible,' " she thought. "In fact, I think she's fascinating."

And so long as she confined herself solely to looking at Julie, she did find her fascinating. She was very young—years younger than Horace, and filled with an ardent vitality. She produced an extraordinary effect of brilliancy, although her conversation was far from clever. She was one of those people who absolutely take one's breath away; her glances, her gestures, her gipsy vividness wrought a spell; one could watch her in a daze, indefinitely.

But the fascination wore off a bit for Frances after she had experienced something of Julie's famous rudeness. She was utterly ignored. Horace tried to talk to her, but he was not fluent, and his dinner engrossed him. She had nothing to do but listen to Julie talking to Lionel, a torrent of gossip about people not personally known to either of them, glib comment on plays and books and fashions and dances. Lionel's interest lay in just these things; he had as many stories as she: those mysterious tales of prominent people, confidential to a degree, heard from someone who really knows . . . If Lionel hated and despised Julie and she loathed him, they dissembled it well. They were friendly, they were more than friendly, they were comrades. He had never talked with such interest to Frankie!

"Did you notice Mrs. Lord on the Avenue yesterday, Li? I never saw such a fool. A skirt like that with her celebrated bowlegs!"

And so on. The impossibleness of Julie was now fully evident to Frances, the gross vulgarity beneath her dainty charm, the malice, the nastiness in her shallow heart. She was glad Lionel didn't like her; she told herself that his absorption in her chatter was only politeness.

When the dinner was over, she retired with Julie to a little music room, where Julie began to smoke. She changed abruptly now that there were no men about, became frankly, brutally hard.

"Well!" she said. "You've picked a winner! When Horace told me Li was going to be married, I couldn't believe it. I told him there wasn't a girl on earth who'd be such a fool."

"Why?" asked Frances coldly.

"The boy's a joke, my dear child! A perfect *joke*! The biggest idiot there is. He spent all the money his

mother left him in two years, just making a fool of himself. And now he expects to sit down on Horace for the rest of his little life. It makes me sick."

Frances had grown rather pale.

"I suppose he thinks he is welcome in his brother's house," she said.

"Lord! He knows I'm sick and tired of his hanging about. It's not that! He doesn't care whether he's *welcome* or not. He worries us to death. And that chump of a Horace always gives in to him. I only hope you'll be able to do something with him. I've told old Horace we didn't understand that in this country—a young, able-bodied man sitting round the house, living on someone else. I said if Horace had any money to waste, he could waste it on me. I can do with all he's got!"

Frances, shocked, outraged, stunned by this sudden and vigorous attack, tried to rally.

"He does work," she said.

"*Work!* My God! Horace told me himself what an infernal nuisance Li is in the office. He comes in late and fiddles about a bit, and then goes uptown again. Work! He just likes to call the money he gets out of Horace a salary instead of graft. It comforts his little pride. Let's see your ring!" she demanded suddenly.

Frances took it off and handed it to her.

"Two carats! And look at the setting! For God's sake! I bet poor Horace had to shell out heavily for that!"

Frances did not put it on again; she held it in her hand. She was in anguish, so great that she was afraid she would not be able to hide it much longer. It called for every ounce of self-control she possessed to speak in a fairly natural voice.

"I didn't understand the situation," she said, "and I'm sure—he didn't—entirely realise——"

"I've spoken plainly enough to make him 'realise.' No; he's a hopeless case; I only wanted to warn you that Horace isn't going to take care of a whole family. Oh, don't get furious! I know you didn't know about it! Only Li's a grafter born and bred."

"You misjudge him," said Frances sternly. She wasn't going to be routed by this horrible little savage. "I don't think you're able to understand a man of his type."

"My Lord! I've met dozens like him. Just a nice, harmless little grafter. You'll find them in every hotel in the city. My dear child, I know men mighty well. I've had experience!"

Then, to Frankie's indescribable relief, she left the topic of Lionel and began a history of her own life, with particular emphasis on her suitors. Her father had been a "Cattle King," she told her, in all seriousness, a millionaire. She had been brought up on a ranch, and then sent to school in the East, to "finish."

"*The* best school in New York," she said. "Dad had a hard time to get me in. But I hated it. I had a great deal of talent for drawing, so I just walked out of the school and got a studio in Washington Square, and plunged right in. I got lots of work from the start, fashions and society sketches. Popper was tickled to death. He said he'd double every cent I made, and he did. He likes independence. But I gave that all up when I got married. I've taken up dancing. I've got a regular gift for it. I could go on the stage to-morrow if I wanted. I've had offers from the big managers."

The men came in then, and she offered an exhibition.

"I'll show you the dance I'm going to do in the Fresh Air Fund Bazaar. You play, Li; go over this music while I get ready," and she disappeared for a long time.

Lionel sat down at the piano and began obediently to

try the music she had handed him; a sensual, banal thing, called new, but very reminiscent. He turned his head to smile at Frankie, and then gave his attention to the music, innocently satisfied with the answering smile he had had from her. The light from the lamp shone on his sleek head; he looked so young, so very slim, so fragile and well-bred; her heart ached for him in his unconscious shame. Of course, *of course*, he didn't realise! She no more despised him than a mother despises a greedy child.

Julie came back in a costume which completed Frankie's nightmare of misery and shame. She called it Hindu. Her slim legs and feet were bare, and her body so gauzily covered . . . Frances involuntarily glanced at her husband, but he was staring up at the smoke rings he was blowing.

Her dancing was good—quite beautiful. But Frances was not an artist, not an æsthete; she was something of a prig and very much of a Defoe. A little—a tiny bit more of either in her nature would have turned the balance and sent her to her feet in terrible indignation. However, she was able to endure the exhibition with apparent coolness, watched the half-naked Julie twisting supplely before Lionel's eyes without a visible trace of what she felt.

But how immeasurably glad she was to get away!

"Please send away the taxi," she asked Lionel. "I'd like to walk a little way. And talk to you."

Cheerful and unsuspecting, he complied.

"Wonderful night!" he remarked, looking with grateful eyes at the river.

She clutched his arm.

"Oh, Lionel!" she cried, and he was startled to hear a sob in her voice.

"What's wrong, dearest girl?" he asked anxiously, trying to see her face in the dark.

"That awful—that dreadful, disgusting woman——" she said, in a broken voice. "Oh, Lionel! You can't imagine! . . . "

"Did she say anything to upset you, old girl?"

"It's not that—— It's . . . I didn't know——"

She dried her eyes and spoke more calmly, all her courage, all her pride, all her love impelling her. She held out the ring, glittering marvellously in the light of a street lamp.

He stared at it in stupefaction.

"Frances!" he cried.

"Please take it! Lionel! My dear boy! I couldn't wear it. . . . She said—*he* had to pay for it. That it's all *his* money. . . . Oh, my dear old Lionel, don't you see? I'll wait—till you can get me one—of your own!"

Regardless of passers-by, he put his arm about her waist.

"Frankie," he said, "I'll do exactly what you want—always. I know I'm not nearly good enough for you. Only tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you to be a *man*!" she cried passionately, and began to cry again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I

FRANCES was a prey to remorse that night. She took into consideration Lionel's upbringing, Horace's indulgence to him, his own generous and careless nature, and she felt that she had hurt him cruelly and unjustly. The thought of his flouted ring brought her almost to tears.

He was very proud, very sensitive in his own queer way. She was even a little afraid that he wouldn't come back, or that, if he did, he would be changed.

It was a great relief to hear him through the telephone, in quite his usual voice, at his usual hour of five o'clock.

"What about a walk this evening?" he suggested. "I'll be waiting at the door for you at eight."

He was remarkably solemn and correct; he took Frankie's arm without a word and set off toward Madison Avenue. It was a warm, misty evening in late September, enervating weather. Frankie was tired and nervous and filled with apprehension. Was he going to reproach her?

He pulled out of his pocket a little bundle of papers fastened by a rubber band, and gave it to her.

"My bank book," he said, "and all the other stuff. You'd better take charge of it, old girl. . . . I'll tell you just how I stand, and you can tell me what I'd better do."

"Oh, Lionel!" she cried, "You *dear* old thing! And I was so afraid you'd be hurt or offended!"

"I think you're right—all that you said," he answered seriously. "I want to make a new start—begin over again. Only it's rather hopeless. I've a hundred and five pounds a year income from my mother, and that's all. No prospects. Not a relative who could leave me a sou. And eighty dollars in the bank. Rather dismal, isn't it?"

"Not a bit! Fancy having an income, and calling the outlook dismal! And you're young, you've got everything before you. You're sure to find a good job before very long——"

"Yes, but my dear girl, that eighty dollars is all I've got to live on for three months and a half, until my next remittance comes. Unless I stop on in Horace's office——"

"No, no! You mustn't stay there! Please, please break off all that, won't you?"

"Whatever you say, old girl. But where am I to live if I leave Horace's?"

"I'll find you a place," she said, rashly.

"I'll have to explain to him, though. . . . What shall I say?"

He really did not understand quite what was expected of him, or what he was doing. It was somehow a fine thing to renounce his comfort and security, and declare himself independent, and as long as Frances wished it, he was willing to do it. But it was a bit—theatrical. After all these years to refuse old Horace's money.

"I'll pop in and take lunch with him to-morrow," he said.

"And tell him that you're going to stand on your own feet," urged Frances. "He'll understand. And think all the more of you. Tell him—be sure—that you appreciate all he's done for you, but that now you're going to take care of yourself."

He agreed.

"I'll come and tell you about it as soon as it's over," he said. "You can expect me about three."

She didn't know with what a heavy heart he went upon this errand, or how well it proved his love and admiration for her. She didn't know, or suspect, what he felt for Horace, and how he dreaded hurting him. Otherwise, she might have understood that he would necessarily be stupid and clumsy and muddle the whole thing, as he did. . . .

II

Miss Eppendorfer was lying down in her bedroom, not to be disturbed. Kurt was not coming that evening, and the poor woman had seized the chance of gratifying her long-starved vice. So that Frances was as good as alone. She waited half an hour for Lionel without thinking much about it; they wouldn't be able to talk anyway. She couldn't go out and leave the authoress in her present condition, and she never entertained Lionel in the flat. They both considered it incorrect. Still, he could tell her what Horace had said. She was anxious about that interview. She was afraid that Horace might have begged him to go on living with him; that he might have weakened Lionel's very new independence.

An hour passed, and she grew a little restless. It wasn't like Lionel to keep her waiting. Why didn't he telephone? She picked up a book and began to read. Another hour. She made herself a cup of tea and tried to be angry, with all the time a dull alarm in her heart. Six o'clock! Her anxiety grew unbearable, in that silent flat, worse than alone. She was not much given to tears, but she shed some now. It grew dark; she lighted a lamp and pulled down the shades and flung herself on the sofa.

She thought the same things any woman would have

thought; that he had met with an accident, been run over, that he was injured, dying, perhaps dead. Then that he had deserted her, because he no longer loved her. Then that there was some mistake, that he had meant Sunday. . . .

At last there was a ring at the bell, and she flew to open the door. Lionel stood outside.

"Lionel!" she cried. "I've been so worried! What *has* been the matter?"

He said nothing, made no move to enter.

"Come in," she said impatiently, "and tell me what's kept you."

Her alarm increased every minute; there was something queer about him. . . .

She took his arm and pulled him gently into the sitting room; then when she was able to look at him in the lamp-light, she knew. She had seen that silly smile, that flush before, had heard that thick and faltering voice.

Her heart seemed to stop beating; her blazing eyes were fixed on his face.

"You're drunk," she said, with what contempt, disgust, and bitterness! "You'd better go."

But he sat down on the sofa and began to cry forlornly, like a child.

"Stop!" she said. "Stop! Miss Eppendorfer'll hear you."

"I can't!" he sobbed.

She closed the door into the hall, and went back to the sofa to find him incredibly and suddenly asleep. She couldn't at first believe in a slumber so very sudden. She shook him.

"Get up and go away!" she said, but it had no effect. There he lay, breathing heavily through his mouth, flushed, oddly serious in his expression, like a weary victor in some mighty struggle.

Frances gave way to a sort of frenzy.

"I can't have two of you!" she cried.

Recklessly she opened the door of Miss Eppendorfer's room, found her also sound asleep, not to be wakened. She revolted utterly then, locked herself into her own little room, careless of what might happen to those others.

For the first time in her life she remained awake all night. Early in the morning, before it was quite light, she slipped into the kitchen to make tea, and then went again to wake Lionel. This time it was not so hard. She gave him a cup of tea, stood in stony silence while he gulped it down, handed him his hat and overcoat, and firmly pushed him, dazed and passive, out of the door.

III

Miss Eppendorfer remained in bed until noon; she was "better" she said, but exhausted and listless. Frances was inordinately busy. She typed page after page of the authoress's manuscript, and when there was absolutely no more to copy, set to work cleaning the table silver. She did not wish to think. It was the end of the world. Nothing ahead, nothing she could endure to contemplate.

She hated Miss Eppendorfer because Lionel had been drunk. It was an illogical and unjust feeling, but she couldn't repress it. She kept away from her as much as possible. She was very thankful to see her go out, arm in arm, with her cousin Kurt, to a concert for which she had bought tickets for a fabulous price. She thought she would go out herself, perhaps to church; she had begun to get ready, in fact, when Lionel arrived. Lionel exactly the same, nonchalant, superior, not a trace even of fatigue——

"The hall boy told me Miss E. and the German chap had gone out, so I thought I'd come up," he said.

Frances was frigidly silent.

"I owe you an explanation," he went on, "only—I haven't any. I . . . had an awful row with Horace, and it knocked me up, and I . . . tried to—more or less—forget it."

"No doubt you succeeded."

She spoke with cold precision, like a school teacher to a prejudged culprit; and he, acknowledging her claims as he always did, forced himself to explain. It was wretched for him, an almost intolerable humiliation to be called to account in this way; he was ashamed of himself, and he longed passionately to drop the subject forever. But Frances was the woman who had promised to marry him, and he felt he owed it to her.

"You see, he was offended. . . . He thought—wanted me to be more—gradual. Stop on in his office, at least. And in the end, we quarrelled. I told him I wouldn't take anything more from him—all that you advised, and so forth. And he—but what's the use in repeating all that? It's the first row we've ever had."

He could not tell her how he regretted old Horace, with what affection and pain he remembered his benefits; couldn't explain how much this "row" had hurt him. He had been horribly tactless and had wounded and infuriated Horace, without making it clear to him—or to himself—what it was about.

If he expected sympathy he was disappointed. If he had only apologised, said he was ashamed and sorry, she would have melted completely; it was this insistence upon the misfortune of having quarrelled with Horace, this cool passing over of his own beastliness, that she couldn't stand. She didn't even ask him to sit down, but remained standing herself, looking straight at him.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, "that I came here like that. Awfully sorry. It wasn't fair to you. But I didn't realize what I was doing."

Frances laughed shortly.

"Don't bother to apologise. Why should I object to being alone all night with two drunken beasts——"

"I say!" he protested.

"It's evident," she went on, "that you don't know at all how I look at that. How I *loathe* it. I'd rather not talk about it at all. I'd rather you'd go."

"You don't mean that, Frankie, old girl!"

"I do!"

He searched her face.

"Frankie, you don't mean . . . I see you do, though. Very well, I'll go. . . . But, Frankie! . . . Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" said Frankie.

IV

Frankie resolved to forget Lionel. She tried her best.

"I made a mistake," she said to herself. "Very well! It's over and done with now. I'm not going to be a sentimental idiot. It's *over*!"

It wasn't, though. Her loneliness was bitter, her wound profound; she had nothing to sustain her but her own self-righteousness—cold comfort in that. It was all very well to tell herself Lionel was no good; whether he was or not, she wanted him back. Worst of all was her worry about him. She was convinced that without her he was lost, was helpless—what all women think about their men. She had the loftiest views about women anyway, and their influence. They were ordained the spiritual monitors of men, as well as the natural guardians of their healths and pocketbooks. Woman was the practical one, the conserver, the frequenter of savings

banks; she was also the beauty and the charm of life. What remained was Man.

Frances had planned a future for them with care; and little by little she fancied she was improving the man himself, making him more responsible, more sedate, more what a woman demands of a husband. She was too intelligent to understand him. She couldn't manage him and comprehend him as an ignorant, emotional woman would have done. With every new idea, every book read, she had retreated from the position that was her birthright.

She thought over Lionel with a passionate desire to do right; tried to obtain guidance from her brain while her heart was dumb. She wondered whether it did him more good to see how seriously she regarded his offence, or whether it would have helped him more to forgive him. Never considered it simply as a matter of cruelty or kindness. She was so concerned with thinking of what was morally best for Lionel that she neglected her own soul's good.

And without doubt her soul suffered. She was becoming irritable, intolerant, over-haughty, wrapped up in her own affairs. She needed Lionel badly, needed his carelessness, his sweet temper. In spite of that, she thought she was "getting over" it splendidly; being sensible, and so on. She was able to eat and to sleep and to live as usual; even looked the same. And then, suddenly, one night, woke up with a piercing pain, a most irresistible tenderness and longing for him.

"How could I have been so heartless!" she asked herself, sitting up in bed, and clasping her hands hysterically. "What did it matter, what he did? What do I care about that? Lionel! Darling! I want you back so!"

She got up then and there and wrote to him, addressing it in care of Horace.

v

He came the next evening. Quite in accordance with his extreme character he had in ten days' time become unnecessarily wretched and shabby in looks and manners. He was even thinner.

He had looked and looked for a job, he said, but no one would have an inexperienced man of his age. He was in despair. So that Frances could not for an instant maintain her injured majesty, but had to comfort and fortify him, even to cry over him a little.

"Don't be discouraged!" she entreated, stroking his hair. "Poor old boy!"

"But I haven't a penny! I used that money in the bank. I've moved into a cheap boarding-house. But still I can't manage. And my remittance doesn't come until January."

Followed an extraordinary period for the lovers. Lionel pawned his watch, his travelling-bag, his cuff-buttons, one thing after another. He would get down to his last dollar and come to Frankie, white with despair, and she would think of something else to do. He would come back from each of these visits to the pawn-shop jubilant and pleading for a "celebration," but Frankie never permitted it. He put everything into her hands without reserve, and received back what she allowed him, unquestioningly. They frequented cinemas instead of theatres; he found a cheaper brand of cigarettes. He did it all, too, with such generosity and simplicity that Frankie was utterly enslaved. He was her child, her ewe lamb, she watched over him, planned for him, guided him, with passionate devotion.

He alternated between ghastly worry that made him

talk about suicide, and the wildest hopefulness. It was Frances who bore the brunt of the misery. She fretted continually, couldn't sleep at night. She thought and schemed and planned for means of sustaining this beloved creature, above all trying to secure him proper food three times a day without his suspecting that some of its cost came from her own pocket. Luckily he almost always forgot how much he had given her to keep for him, and how much he had spent out of it. He didn't imagine the suffering he caused her. On the contrary, he believed that his fits of extravagant gaiety, in reality quite beyond his control, were contrived especially to cheer up Frances.

He was sometimes ready to admit to himself that Frankie's disposition was not quite what he had once thought it. She was absolutely cross. Time after time she refused to go out with him, even to the "movies"; she said they couldn't afford it.

"But you don't realise," he protested, "how much I need a bit of recreation."

"I realise how much you're going to need a bit of money," she replied grimly. "You can't be childish. You'll have to do without *everything* but necessities for a while."

VI

Inspiration came from a wholly unexpected source. Frankie was sitting in her room in the dark one evening, after a walk with Lionel, exhausted from her effort to encourage him in a mood of black despair. She had drawn her chair up to the window and sat looking out over the roof of the next house at the cloudy sky. There was the usual noise from the court, the shrill children who never went to bed, the phonographs, a woman singing in a piercing, artificial voice. She was used to it

now, scarcely heard it, but it filled her ears, and she was unaware of Miss Eppendorfer's entrance until she touched her on the shoulder.

"I knocked and knocked!" said she. "I wanted to ask you to make me a cup of coffee; I'm so nervous."

Frankie said 'Of course,' but her voice was weary, and Miss Eppendorfer noticed it.

"What's the trouble, my dear?" she asked, kindly. "Let's sit here and talk a while."

She sat down on the bed where she could reach out and lay a friendly hand on Frankie's arm.

"I've noticed—it's not curiosity. . . . It's only that I'm very fond of you—you can't imagine *how* fond of you, my dear. . . . I don't expect you to return it. I know I'm not lovable. And probably you despise me for—lots of things. But, my dear! My dear! I do wish you so well! I'd do anything! If you'd like to tell me, perhaps I could help. . . . I've had experience enough. I could understand."

Frances was silent. She couldn't bring herself to confide in Miss Eppendorfer.

"I think I know," the other went on. "It's money, isn't it? You want to marry, but you're afraid."

"Not afraid," said Frances, nettled. "It's only that I don't want to be stupid—rash—I don't think it's right to marry on nothing. I'd rather wait ten years."

"You're making a mistake," said the authoress. "But tell me about it."

Frances hesitated a moment.

"You see," she began. "I'm afraid that perhaps I made a mistake—advised him wrongly. You see, he was depending entirely on his brother—living with him. He'd never really thought how—that it wasn't quite—very self-respecting. And I asked him to stop, to try to stand on his own feet. And I'm not sure if he's able to do

that. He has *nothing* now, except a little more than a hundred pounds a year or so."

"Except!" said Miss Eppendorfer.

"Oh, of course, it helps. But the trouble is, he's perfectly inexperienced. He can't seem to find a job. We've—he has answered advertisements and registered at agencies, and nothing's any good. I'm so afraid of his getting completely discouraged and going back to his brother again. It's so wretched for him. There's no chance of our being married for years——"

"Why?"

"We couldn't both live on a hundred pounds a year—about five hundred dollars!"

"Why should you try? You're earning something, and under no expense. Why don't you get married anyway, and go on as you are?"

Frankie was amazed.

"I never thought of such a thing. It . . . we couldn't have any home. . . ."

"Does that matter? You'd have each other. Oh, if I were you, if I were you. . . ! I shouldn't think of anything but—just having each other, just your love. I'd never think of a home or money. Only of the man I loved."

Her voice broke, and her hand on Frankie's arm trembled.

"My dear, I'm speaking against my own interests, for of course I don't want to lose you. . . . But you don't understand, you don't appreciate love. It isn't a *home* that you want. My dear! My dear! And would you let him wait and eat out his heart, for years, for your vanity, until he could give you all the silly little things you think you want? You don't know men, you don't know life; you don't know how very short a time we have for love. You don't know him. You don't know

anything. If you did, you wouldn't let this go! You'd be happy while you could, you'd make him happy."

Frances didn't stir; there was absolute silence for a long time. Then she got up.

"I'll make the coffee now," she said, and, in spite of herself, couldn't keep a trace of gentleness out of her tone, something that approached tenderness. She hated sentimentality, but—no use denying that she was deeply moved by the poor woman's vehemence, by the thought she had conveyed. Of course, the advice of Miss Eppendorfer was not to be taken too seriously, and yet, couldn't she be right on *some* points? She attended to the coffee with earnestness, thinking all the while. What if she had been cold and selfish, and made her own dear boy unhappy? A coward? . . . And a faint realisation of the truth not fully seen or known till much later came upon her, of the pitiful folly of waiting, of patience and of prudence in this poor life so short and so hazardous.

"I will! I will!" she said to herself. "He shan't struggle on alone. I *won't* lose my happiness—our happiness. I'm *not* afraid!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I

SHE hurried downstairs to meet Lionel the next evening, flushed and resolute.

"Let's walk!" she said.

"It's raining——"

"I don't care. I want to talk to you. I must!"

He didn't approve of walking in the rain; he thought it imprudent and eccentric, so that he was somewhat stiff; but she took no notice of that. She thrust her hand through his arm and squeezed it a little.

"Lionel!" she whispered, "Shall we get married?"

"My dearest girl!" he cried. "You know there's nothing on God's earth I want so much. But——"

"No! Listen! We can!"

And she told him Miss Eppendorfer's plan. He refused violently; it wasn't fair to Frankie; he would be a cad, a beast.

"You'll be much more of a beast if you won't. We can be happy. I'll save up, and after you find a job, you can save too, so that we can soon have a home of our own. And until then, of course, we'll keep it a secret. But, oh, Lionel, I do so want us to be safely married, so that no one can separate us. So that if you were to be sick, I could look after you."

He comprehended perfectly and sympathised with that curious and touching idea of all lovers; that if only they can be married, no ill can touch them; they are safe.

"I can't!" he said. "Absolutely I can't. Don't you see, old girl, I want to give you *something*—I don't want to *take* everything from you. I want——"

"Don't let pride stand in the way!" she entreated. "Lionel, only suppose one of us were to die! Dear, darling old boy, let's be brave. Let's just go ahead, and if things are hard, why, we'll go through with them together."

"I ought not," he said miserably. "It's not fair to you."

He felt obliged to bring forward all the objections which obviously presented themselves, but he did so without spirit. For the preposterous idea appealed to him irresistibly. He said, "Wait," but he didn't mean it. He abhorred waiting at all times, and above all, waiting for Frankie. She kindled him, thrilled him with her serious madness.

"We can't waste our best years," said Frankie. "Really, Lionel, it's not a silly plan. I'm not rash, you know it. I *know* this will be the best plan for us both."

She was determined to hold him tightly, to defend him from his own weakness, to fortify him. For this, any sacrifice of pride, of worldly advantage, was justified. She had to marry Lionel to save him, even if in saving him everything else was lost.

"I'm not convinced," he insisted, "but, old girl, I haven't got the strength to refuse. I'd have to be more than mortal to refuse to marry my beautiful girl."

"Stop being so wretched!" she ordered. "We're going to be happy. We're going to help each other."

He caught her in his arms.

"Darling!" he cried, "I'll—I'd do *anything* to make you happy. I'll try. I'm not good enough, but I'll try. I—absolutely worship you, Frankie!"

And added, more quietly:

"And when you're my wife, I'll amount to something."

II

He went to the Grand Central with her on Christmas Eve, to say good-bye, for conscience compelled her to go back to Brownsville Landing for the holidays. They were both in a mood of rapture, although Frankie was somewhat obsessed by finances. She had given Lionel five envelopes, each containing just enough money for one of the five days she was to be away.

"Now remember!" she warned, "that's *all* you've got, until I get back. I'll come early on New Year's morning, and Miss Eppendorfer'll give me my cheque. She never keeps me waiting a day. Then I'll lend you that until the fifteenth. But do please, please be careful of what you've got! Remember it's all you've got! You will be sensible, won't you?"

"No. Frankie, aren't you sorry to think of my being all alone on Christmas day in a beastly cheap boarding house?"

"You know I am! But don't think about it, dear; think about the sixteenth."

They had planned to be married then, the very day after his quarterly remittance came.

"Five minutes to! We'd better go down to the lower level. Oh, dear old boy, I do hate to leave you! You will be careful, won't you? About everything. About money—and you know what!"

"Dashed if I do! Money and what?"

Her eyes filled with tears.

"About—drinking," she whispered.

"Oh, by Jove!" he cried, startled. "But, my dear girl,

I don't go in for that, you know. I'm not quite a drunkard."

"I know! I know, darling! Only I *had* to say it. Don't be offended!"

"Of course not, you blessed baby!"

"And you will take at least one glass of milk a day, won't you? You're so thin! And——"

"I shall! I shall!" he cried, laughing. "Come on, old girl! The gates are open. I say! It's perfectly all right to kiss you good-bye, isn't it? I might be your brother—or your husband. Everyone does, eh?"

She reflected.

"Yes," she said, with a blush, and raised her face to his. "Good-bye! God bless you, my own boy! Take care of yourself! I shall think of you every minute!"

"Good-bye, my beautiful girl!" he answered. "God bless you! Come back to me soon!"

He stood watching her down the platform, strong, eager, and splendid. Saw her go, never to return to him.

BOOK THREE: MR. PETERSEN IS
BROUGHT LOW

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I

MR. PETERSEN had remained faithful to the memory of Minnie for five years. It cannot be said that he had grieved, or suffered; his attachment had not been a very passionate one; yet Minnie had not misread him. He really had wanted to marry her, had felt for her a mild and kindly sort of love.

He had not, however, been over-anxious for marriage. He cared little for women; in all these five years his heart had never been touched, and he had formed no ties. Nor was he lonely, except very rarely, perhaps in a Spring twilight, or while listening to certain beloved pieces of music. He had the most admirable sort of reputation. Temperate, honest, thrifty, his life was without a secret; he didn't talk about his affairs, but he was perfectly willing that others should find out about them. In his own sober way, he cherished a terrific pride, not so much for his achievements, as for his spotless honour. He was the Socialist of the world's dream, the man who harmed no one, who was always just, always open to argument, always generous. As far as was humanly and sensibly possible he put into practice his convictions. He fraternised with the workmen—the intelligent ones—asked them to dinner on Sunday. He admitted making and keeping a considerable sum of money, and was always ready and willing to explain this course.

"The only valuable Socialist," said he, "is the one who works for the advancement of all. How do you wish me to so work then if I strip myself of power? Money,

in our modern world, is power. The Socialists must first of all concentrate money in their own hands."

He quite satisfied his comrades. He was respected everywhere, because he was without arrogance or ostentation, and yet had so admirable a balance in the bank. He had made most of his money through a "development park," which he had planned and executed; scores of little houses along orderly streets, planted with saplings; each house with its lawn, its tiny back garden, all neat, bright and prosperous. They were built for the factory workers, and Mr. Petersen had included a number of what he called "built-in features"; little bookcases, china closets, window seats, and so on. He knew what the comrades wanted, and he gave them honest and generous measure for their money. How could he not succeed?

He lived in the same solid, modest house in the village, with the same Swede and his wife serving him in Socialistic fashion. In appearance too he was quite unchanged; immense, red-faced, fair-haired, blonde-moustached; slow, good-tempered, rather silent. Within himself, however, he was conscious of those profound changes we all experience and which the world ignores. He had read, had thought, had seen; he had grown. He believed himself in every way a better and a stronger man. Although he had *felt* very little.

Minnie's abrupt disappearance had distressed him and worried him; he had made many enquiries about her, but her sister was surprisingly curt and discouraged him.

"She's gone to New York," she told him. "She has a position there. I don't hear from her often."

There came a day when she even said, biting her lip:

"I'd rather not talk about Minnie. She—we're not on very good terms."

This had caused him a pang, for he surmised that it meant a man. He had said he was sorry, and he was. He pitied that bright, lovely Frances, condemned to

lonely drudgery. He wished to be nice to her; to help her; he attempted to make little friendly visits now and then, very patient with her growing irritability. He saw how things were; she didn't get on with the old lady as Minnie had, relations were strained. He watched the four years pass, crushing her, embittering her, ageing her. Her youth died, she became severe, still beautiful but no longer charming. She managed the moribund old house better than her sister ever had done, but it had lost its old air of homeliness. It was deserted, it was desolate. She earned a bit of money by baking cakes for the Woman's Exchange, and embroidering tablecloths. Like her grandmother, she "managed," never able, of course, to pay the accumulating debts, never a penny the richer at the end of a year than at the beginning; simply keeping her head above water, procuring food for them to eat, clothes for them to wear, maintaining an appearance not too humiliating for a Defoe. It was touching and horrible. Mr. Petersen urged her to come back into his office again, but she refused.

"You could get some young girl from the village to look after your grandmother," he said, but she stopped him.

"Not at any price could I get anyone to do what I do."

It was quite true. A servant would have required lunch, which Frankie didn't; would have expected to be warm in winter, to rest in the terrible heat which overwhelmed the river valley in mid-summer.

Mr. Petersen waived the question of rent. After a time it was mentioned no more. The two women didn't thank him; it seemed not only proper but essential that Defoes should live in the Defoe house. Mr. Petersen, after all, was a stranger, an intruder, a Swede. And he didn't *need* the money, either. So he didn't get it.

In the middle of a terrible winter the old lady died of

pneumonia, and, as soon as the funeral had taken place, conducted in a seemly manner, Frankie went off. He heard nothing more of her. She never wrote to him, or to anyone he knew.

He remodelled the house. With what curious, painful feelings did he watch its dismantlement, walk into that gloomy room Minnie had so long inhabited and see for the first time its poverty. All the furniture was left there; doubtless it belonged to the creditors, but none of them troubled to claim it. All old, shabby, ugly. There were lots of closets, cupboards, a big attic, filled with astounding rubbish, clothes, old papers, broken furniture, pictures. Whatever was worth saving, Mr. Petersen removed to his own house, the rest he burned in a sort of sacrificial bonfire. He saw the sagging old bed, the little rocking chair, the lame bureau from Minnie's room go up in smoke and all the while he thought with profound melancholy of the brisk, pleasant little woman. He sighed over her, wished with all his heart that he could find her again and put her into his own orderly and comfortable home. Solemnly he led the silly old horse, more provoking than ever in its senility, back to his own stable, while his housekeeper carried the cats.

The house, because of its size, was destined for a boarding-house. That too put him in mind of intrepid Minnie and her venture.

"Poor girl!" he thought. "A brave little soul! What's become of her, I wonder?"

II

This day he was not thinking about her; he was busy in his office, dictating letters to his spinster stenographer, the sound of his drawling, hesitating voice filling the little room. A window was open to let in the sweet May air, and a breeze ruffled his hair. As usual he was in his shirt sleeves.

The door was open, and in she came; said, gently:

"Mr. Petersen!"

"Miss Minnie!" he cried, jumping up, and according to his custom, hurrying into his respectable dark coat.

"Well, well, Miss Minnie!"

She shook her head.

"Mrs. Naylor," she corrected him, with a smile; the very same pleasant, kindly smile. He stared at her, smiling himself, and shaking his head.

"Well, well!" he repeated.

She hadn't changed much; she was stouter and a trifle more serious, that was all. He observed that she was in mourning, wearing a black blouse and skirt somewhat like his housekeeper but dowdier and cheaper. Nevertheless, she didn't look *poor*; somehow you didn't pity her.

"Mrs. Naylor," he repeated.

"I'm a widow," she said, simply. He answered, in very much the same simple and friendly way—

"I'm sorry."

Then she said, smiling again, but with a hint of melancholy:

"I've come to you for advice again. I look on you as an old friend, Mr. Petersen."

"I am!" he assured her.

"I know it!"

He held out a huge hand.

"Sit down," he said. "Miss Layne, you shall have a holiday in honour of Mrs. Naylor's return."

The spinster stenographer, disapproving, suspicious, with a comically false smile, put on a pinched little jacket and a hat and jerked out, nodding in duty bound to this odious widow.

"Now!" said Mr. Petersen.

Without too much emphasis, in just the quiet, well-bred way he admired, she told him her little story.

"My husband had a great deal of trouble . . . in business, and so on. He was English, and I don't think he understood our ways very well. So . . . when he . . . died, there wasn't anything. Nothing at all. And I have a little girl. . . . I sold everything I could, and then—somehow—I wanted to come back here—where father was born. . . . And I remembered all your kindness and I thought perhaps you'd help me—advise me."

"To the very best of my ability," he said, soberly.

"I thought of a boarding-house. Would there be a good chance for one here?"

Still the same idea; perhaps it is an obsession with the womanly woman.

Mr. Petersen suggested a thorough discussion of her problem from every side.

"Do you mind, then, if I bring little Sandra in?" Minnie asked. "I didn't want to bother you——"

"By all means. Where is she? I'll fetch her."

"Downstairs," said Minnie. "Just inside the door."

She was standing there with a patience that touched his heart, a thin, tall, little girl-baby, with limpid grey eyes and straight black hair. One of those indescribably appealing children, filled with a divine pathos, a soul-stirring beauty. She was very quiet, too subdued, he thought, and too fragile. She took his hand willingly and toiled up the stairs at his side; she said nothing, except:

"Is Mother there?"

"Yes, pet," he answered.

He knew at that instant that he was going to marry Minnie and take care of her and of this little creature too. He looked down upon its dark head with a new and poignant tenderness. He would be its father.

The child ran up to Minnie and stood beside her, looking up into her face calmly. And she looked back at it with an expression he had never conceived her capable

of: rapturous, idolatrous passion. Her proud eyes questioned him, and he willingly responded.

"She is beautiful," he said.

"I can't help thinking so," said Minnie.

Their business discussion amounted to very little. No one could discuss business with Minnie, anyway. It was an absurd idea.

Simply, Mr. Petersen asked if he couldn't lend her a bit until she had "looked round," and without demur Minnie accepted. In some intangible but perfectly plain way she suggested that she accepted only because of her little Sandra and that accordingly the acceptance was justified, if not sanctified. Mr. Petersen was ready to believe this.

"And now," he said, when the money had changed hands, "there's the problem of finding a place for you to live."

He suggested several places for her to telephone, and she did so. The extreme propriety of both of them forbade his appearing in any such transaction. There was nothing suitable to be had; as a very last resort he proposed the Eagle House, and there she was obliged to go.

"I'll call this evening, if I may," he said, "to see if you're all right."

III

The Eagle House was little changed from the days when Frankie had lunched there, the same four-story, brown brick building with awnings, much the worse for wear, boldly marked "Eagle House." It still derived its support from the "Pool Room and Café," reached by a separate entrance, but something had been done for the comfort of the "guest," as well—a sun-baked, uneven little tennis court now appeared on the hitherto vacant lot beside the hotel. Inside it was just as sordid, as fly-blown, as horribly gloomy.

But Minnie was not fastidious. She discovered that there was at least one other lady stopping there, the wife of a visiting cotton-mill magnate, and that satisfied her. With her child by the hand she walked sedately through the lobby, thick with tobacco smoke, crowded with the travelling salesmen and the village loafers who composed the clientele of the Eagle House, and went upstairs to take possession of a tiny bedroom with a single bed for both of them. It was very cheap and that was what she required. She unpacked their very few belongings quite cheerfully and washed the little girl's face.

"Shan't we be happy here!" she said.

They were rather late in coming down, and the dining room was full of men, the waitresses flying round, exchanging sallies with the guests, a brilliant glare pouring down from an electrolier high overhead. Minnie stood in the doorway, still holding the child's hand, a little bewildered by the noise and bustle and by the frankness with which everyone turned to regard them. Unassailably respectable, she met and countered the general regard and with dignity advanced to a little table in a corner. A book was brought for the little girl to sit on and an interested waitress presented a grease-spotted menu. They ate their meal composedly; once in a while the clear voice of the child could be heard asking a question. It behaved wonderfully well. It ate what its mother ate, without regard for any silly modern ideas as to what was suitable to its little wants—and it ate mighty little.

They finished and went upstairs to what was known as the "Ladies' Sitting Room," a big room, unseparated from the hall, furnished with a mouldering "set" in mahogany and obliterated brocade; a most desolating room, with one naked electric light. But how respectable, situated as it was, directly at the head of the stairs, baldly open to the gaze of each and every one of the guests, passing by on the way to his room! There was a table

piled with magazines years and years old; Minnie and the child sat down by this and began looking them over in silence. So Mr. Petersen found them, and wondered at and pitied the precocious sobriety of the tiny girl. He took her on his knee and lifted up her face.

"A beautiful child!" he said again.

Again Minnie beamed.

"And so good!" she said. "Never a bit of trouble! Mother's comfort, aren't you, Sandra?"

"I are," said the baby, seriously.

"When does she go to bed?" he enquired. He thought the little face looked pale and tired.

"Whenever I do," Minnie answered, and then and there expressed her unalterable opposition to all these silly, high-flown ideas that women got out of books. (Mr. Petersen fancied he recognised this antagonism to book learning.) She brought up her Sandra according to her own common-sense and the dictates of a mother's heart, and not according to doctors and *books*. In a *natural* way.

Mr. Petersen had nothing to say on that dangerous subject. He had come to ask Minnie if she would like to go to work in his office.

"But I don't know anything. I can't do anything!"

"You'll learn easily."

"And what could I do with Sandra?"

"I thought of that. My housekeeper's a very fine woman; I spoke to her; she says she'd be glad to take care of the little girl all day."

Thus it was arranged.

"I might as well stop here," said Minnie, "until I'm more settled, anyway."

Mr. Petersen agreed, and as he didn't think it proper that his visit should be a long one, rose to take leave. He clasped Minnie's hand over the head of her child.

"A brave, fine, sensible woman!" he thought.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I

As an office worker Minnie was not so successful as Mr. Petersen had anticipated. Not by any means. She tried; she was very earnest and, in a way, painstaking, but it was extremely difficult to teach her anything. Within a week Mr. Petersen was bitterly regretting Miss Layne, whom he had ruthlessly, although generously, discharged. He was obliged to admit that Minnie was not bright or quick, and neither was she accurate. She learned to typewrite, but how badly! At figures she was hopeless. She always made mistakes.

"But I know you'll go over them," she would say, in regard to her crooked and erroneous columns. "You're sure to find any mistakes there are."

He remembered Frances, her capability and intelligence. He asked after her.

"She's gone out to the Coast," Minnie told him. "She's settled out there. I never hear from her."

Evidently a serious breach. He regretted it; he thought what a help Frances might be to her poor sister.

Somehow it distressed him to see the poor plump little soul working away, poring over his books. He got Miss Layne back again, and she did all the work that really mattered, and left the rest for her abhorred colleague. She detested and despised and feared Minnie. She had seen at once that the artful widow was sure to hoodwink Mr. Petersen.

He saw strange things going on, which amused while they troubled him. He saw Minnie putting pencils and

erasers and sheets and sheets of folded paper into her coat pocket. For her child, no doubt: but though he smiled at her maternal obsession, he was growing convinced that the womanly woman is out of place in a business office. . . .

Her conduct toward Miss Layne he could not admire. She was so unnecessarily haughty, so frigid. And insisted so upon this being her first experience of "work."

"Of course *you're* used to it," she would say, whenever she had made a glaring mistake, "but *I've* never been outside my own home before."

She liked to bring her lunch with her, sandwiches and so on which the hotel put up for her—as well as fruit and cake which she purloined from the dinner table—and she made a great ceremony of spreading out a little embroidered doily on the desk, on which to lay her food.

"I do love to make things a little bit dainty and home-like," she told Mr. Petersen. "You don't mind, do you?"

But the doily was soon very far from dainty. Mr. Petersen thought he would not care to eat anything that had lain on it. He felt sorrier than ever for the poor little woman when he saw her sitting before it, so daintily eating thick ham sandwiches, and adding new bits of butter and strings of fat to her homelike tablecloth. In the course of time, the rats ate it, lace and all, and she had nothing daintier than several sheets of his best type-writing paper, fresh every day, on which to lay out her repast.

It began to dawn upon her before very long that she was not altogether indispensable; that Mr. Petersen and Miss Layne could manage the office very well without her. So she began entreating them to teach her, anything and everything. The books, especially. And, as she wrote a good enough hand, and apparently took great pains, Mr. Petersen allowed her to post certain items,

providing she didn't try to write in any of her own totals. She enjoyed doing this; she used to ask Mr. Petersen for "the books" as early in the morning as possible, because she liked to see him open the safe and hand these precious volumes to her.

But she was detected in an awful deed. He *saw* her, with his own eyes, carefully tearing out one of the numbered pages.

"Mrs. Naylor!" he cried. "What are you doing?"

She looked up, blushing crimson.

"I was going to copy it all again," she explained pitifully. "I hadn't written it very nicely. I didn't have a proper pen. And I did take such pride in having it all look nice!"

The books went back to Miss Layne again, while Mr. Petersen invented tasks for Minnie.

She took her work with the utmost seriousness. One day Mr. Petersen surprised her wiping away a surreptitious tear.

"Now, then!" he said kindly, "What's the matter?"

She tried to answer cheerfully, but her voice failed.

"Sandra doesn't seem well," she said, "I don't know—her throat——"

"But, my dear Mrs. Naylor, why didn't you stay home? You mustn't worry yourself like this!"

"I didn't want to neglect my work," she said.

And she meant it; she had, in Minnie-fashion, made herself believe that she was essential, that her absence would cause trouble. She *had* to believe this; her vanity would have suffered too cruelly otherwise.

Mr. Petersen assured her and reassured her, almost begged her to go home, even appealed to Miss Layne, who answered, in what a tone, that she *thought* she could manage alone.

So Minnie put on her poor little coat and hat and

hurried off to Mr. Petersen's house. She had never been in it before. Mrs. Hansen, the housekeeper, observed her coming up the front steps with deep misgivings. She knew her well by sight; had often seen her in the old days, driving by with her sister, and even then had been inordinately irritated. . . . The idea of Mr. Petersen, king of men, learned, just, endowed with every virtue, forever picking his choicest flowers and fruits for those "beggars," as she called them! Living there all those years without paying him a penny, and then, if you please, walking off without so much as thank you! Ungrateful creatures, owing everyone, and turning up their noses at honest people ten times better than themselves. And this one was the worst of the lot.

However, with a manner absolutely correct, Mrs. Hansen opened the door, and even smiled.

"I am Mrs. Naylor," said Minnie, pleasantly.

"I know who *you* are, and all about you!" thought Mrs. Hansen, though aloud she said, "Yes, ma'am." Although her husband was a Socialist, and her revered Mr. Petersen as well, Mrs. Hansen had no patience with such ideas. She knew herself to be a housekeeper, and as a housekeeper, socially obliged to call this widow "ma'am."

"I came for my little girl," Minnie went on. "I felt worried about her this morning. She didn't seem well."

Mrs. Hansen had her private opinion about the cause of the child's listlessness, which she had confided to her husband, but not, of course, to Mr. Petersen, whom she looked upon as already lost.

"The child's up till all hours of the night," she said to Hansen, "and eats all sorts of trash. What could you expect?"

"I think she's better now," she said to Minnie, "she's taken two glasses of milk."

"You do take such wonderful care of her," Minnie returned; "she tells me at night of so many things you've done for her."

"She's a lovely, good child," Mrs. Hansen answered, quite unmoved by the flattery.

She led Minnie through a narrow red-carpeted passage into her kitchen, pride and joy of her life, filled with sun and sweet air, utterly clean, gleaming and neat. From the window she pointed out the quiet baby, sitting on the back steps, leaning her head against a post, languid, thoughtful, quite contented. Beside her sat an immense cat.

"Why!" cried Minnie. "That—can it *possibly* be Michael?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's your cat. Mr. Petersen took it after your sister left."

Minnie looked down with tears in her eyes at her long-lost darling, sleek and fat still, but old; his buccaneer swagger gone, his insolent eyes dim. She touched his head, with the furry skin so tightly drawn over the round little skull; but he never stirred. He didn't know her, didn't care for her.

Then she took Sandra by the hand and led her off, out of the fresh air and the quiet garden, back to the hotel, where she got her into bed in their hot little room and read to her, hovered over her, flooded her with sympathy.

"You just needed Mother, didn't you, baby?" she said. "Mother knows what her little girl wants!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I

AFTER a decorous interval, Mr. Petersen began discreetly to woo. He had considered the matter very thoroughly, and he was sure that his happiness lay in marrying Minnie. He did not deceive himself, he realised that she had faults, but they were faults he didn't mind, lovable feminine faults. And her virtues were sublime. He knew that she would make his home an earthly paradise, with her contented, thoroughly domestic disposition and her good-temper. It never occurred to him that the lack of accuracy and method she had shown in the office might be transported to this other realm; he felt sure she would be a marvellous housekeeper. He considered her practical, perhaps because she confined her attention solely to petty things, never bothered with the ideal, the theoretical. . . .

He also admired her dowdiness, thought it showed that she made no unworthy effort to attract his sex. He didn't know that Minnie was far beyond that, that she had weapons infinitely more deadly. She didn't need to *look* charming; she was instinct with an allurements irresistible and fatal. She was all woman, nothing but woman. She had no ambition; her mission was simply to exist. Her power lay in the fact that no man would ever be able to understand her.

Mr. Petersen knew that she wouldn't be the comrade and equal he had longed for in his younger days; she would never comprehend his ideas and theories, he was sure. She would never become a Socialist—although she

might become a parrot—or know what a Socialist was. She would remain unalterably Minnie. And that was what he wanted now.

Not even the shyest man could have dreaded proposing to Minnie. She was certain not to laugh or to be capricious. One might have said that her nature presupposed proposals. What is more, he felt sure that she knew his intention, and he had seen no hint of discouragement in her manner toward him. That counted for much with Mr. Petersen, the proud, who couldn't bear to be laughed at.

It came about easily and naturally, in the office one Saturday afternoon; of course when they were alone. So easily and naturally that one might have imagined—

Minnie said something about the future, how black it looked for a lonely woman with a dependent child.

"I can't go on like this," she said, "and be separated from Sandra most of the time. You're awfully good and kind—I'll never forget it—but of course I can't stay here forever. I know I'm not very useful to you. You could find plenty of others who would do as well, or better."

He was silent, a portentous sort of silence, marshalling his forces, bringing his somewhat slow mind to bear on this subject.

"Do you think I could get a place as a housekeeper?" she asked earnestly, "where I could have Sandra with me?"

A broad smile overspread his face.

"I think so," he said.

"Oh! Do you know of anyone?"

"Yes, if it will suit you."

"Please tell me!"

Never in life had he so enjoyed a joke.

"It's a nice place," he went on slowly, "in this town."

"With a good salary, do you think?"

"Well, yes, over ten thousand a year, I should say."

"Oh, you're joking, Mr. Petersen," she cried, in such a disappointed voice that he stopped smiling and took her warm little hand.

"Minnie!" he said. "It's I . . . I want you. I'll do everything I can to make you happy and your child too. I've got on well; you'll be comfortable. If you—if you would care to marry me?"

For one instant a terrible look crossed her face—a sort of horror. She grew so white that he thought she would faint.

"You're so kind——" she faltered.

"You mean you will?"

"I'll have to think," she answered. That was the answer he liked, modest, and prudent.

II

She altered strangely after that talk. Before his eyes she grew thinner and paler, looked really ill. A shadow lay over her, a trouble she could scarcely support. It distressed the good man very much in more ways than one, for he imagined she was struggling against her loyalty to her dead husband, and he was not only sorry for her, but jealous as well. She avoided him noticeably, and he was too proud and too kind to trouble her. In the office she was formal, almost hostile. All this hurt him and puzzled him; it was not until long, long after that he realised what a terrible thing was taking place in her queer little soul.

She didn't want her child out of her sight. In the evening, when he came now and then to see her, she would sit with the little creature on her lap, pressed against her heart, sleepy and patient.

He began to fancy that he was in some way offensive to her, and little by little tried to resume his old manner, to be kind but quite impersonal. A faint resentment aided him; he called her Mrs. Naylor, and ceased to call on her at the hotel.

And, directly he began to draw back, she advanced. He permitted it. He wouldn't see her hints; he waited until she actually asked him to call. She had tried to dress up a little, with a lace collar on her rusty old black blouse, and she had left Sandra upstairs, with a bag of candy and some new paper dolls. She was waiting in the Ladies' Sitting Room, with the naked light illumining her sallow, anxious face; not pretty, not very young, not fresh, and in a decidedly disadvantageous situation. But fully able to cope with it.

"Mr. Petersen," she said, very, very gravely, "some time ago you made me an offer. I have reason to believe that you regret it now. I want to tell you that you are quite free."

"I don't regret it. If it were of any use, I should be only too glad to repeat it."

"You'd better not," she said.

He enquired why.

"Because," she said, with her charming smile, "I should accept it."

Thus were they betrothed.

And now she was still more surprising. She wanted to be married without delay.

"We don't want any fuss or bother," she said. "There aren't any preparations to make."

"It can't be too soon for me," he said.

"Why not next week?" she suggested.

He professed himself delighted.

"And—Chris——" she added, with a blush, "I'd like

ever so much to get a new dress for Sandra and a few little things——”

He gave her a cheque for five hundred dollars, which he thought would be ample. So that he was surprised, on the wedding day, to find her wearing a grey suit he was sure he had seen on her before. She was waiting in the “Ladies’ Sitting Room,” with little Sandra beside her, dressed in a lace frock trimmed with ribbon and a flopping beflowered hat which almost hid her grave little face. He complimented Minnie upon her appearance, although he was deeply disappointed, and then began to praise Sandra, when Minnie burst into tears.

“Oh, my poor, poor baby!” she sobbed. “My poor innocent little lamb! She doesn’t realise one bit—— Oh, you *will* be nice to her, won’t you?”

“Come, come! You know I will. She loves me already, don’t you, pet?”

To his chagrin and surprise, the child answered clearly:

“I don’t love you. I like you. I only love my daddy.”

He knew quite well that she had been taught to say that. It wasn’t a child’s thought. He turned redder than ever, but held his peace.

“I’m doing wrong!” cried Minnie. “You see!”

“But surely . . . Little Sandra, you like old Uncle Chris a lot, don’t you?”

Sandra looked at her weeping mother, then at Mr. Petersen’s distressed face, and herself began to cry. Minnie caught her in her arms and tried to comfort her.

“Don’t cry, dear. Mother wouldn’t let *anyone* hurt you.”

“Minnie!” he protested.

“Oh, do stop!” she cried. “You don’t know anything about children. Don’t cry, sweetheart! You’re going

to live right in the house with dear old Michael! Isn't that *nice!*"

Mr. Petersen suspected at this time and at future times, that Minnie didn't do all she might to make the child fond of him. In the course of time she dried her eyes, her mother, red-eyed and pale, straightened her hat, and the festive wedding party set off for the church.

It was evidently a terrible ordeal for Minnie. And for poor Mr. Petersen. He looked at her haggard and tormented face, and suffered from many new doubts. Was she marrying him for money, for a home for her child, for safety?

"She doesn't love me," he said to himself, and added, with deeper unhappiness, "She doesn't even *like* me."

They went out, man and wife, back to Mr. Petersen's house, where Mrs. Hansen waited to salute them. She knew her days there were numbered, but the occasion called for a smile and a cheerful demeanour, and she complied.

III

"Shall we put it in the papers?" asked Mr. Petersen.

"No!" cried Minnie, "I hate that!"

They were at supper, their first meal together. And how different from what he had imagined! There was still daylight in the room, even a last gleam of sun striking across the table. It looked so charming and so peaceful that Mr. Petersen couldn't help expecting some comment. Surely she would notice his linen and the fine old silver? Or at least Mrs. Hansen's cooking? How could she not be delighted at finding such a home for herself and her child? He had proudly led her from room to room, each one so exquisitely clean and neat, furnished so well and substantially, and she hadn't made a single remark about the comfort or the beauty of any of them.

Just followed him and asked, idiotically, "And this is the sitting-room?" and so on. He was too even-tempered and too fond of Minnie to be angry, but he was deeply disappointed. Without showing it in any way.

Quite in his usual way, he resumed:

"Would you like to send out a few announcements? To your sister, perhaps?"

She sprang to her feet to answer him.

"No, no, no!" she cried, in an odd, hysterical voice. "What's the matter with you? Can't you let things be as they are? Can't you let me alone? I hate that vulgar, nasty display. I won't have it! I'll deny it! I'll deny it!"

She stamped her foot and began to cry furiously, so that in the end he had to call in Mrs. Hansen, and between them they did their best to soothe her, and persuade her to go directly to bed, where a tray was brought her, so that she could finish her supper in peace. They arranged a good light, and found a cheerful book for her.

Mr. Petersen lingered a minute after Mrs. Hansen had gone downstairs. He looked down at the worn and wretched Minnie.

"My dear," he said gently, "don't worry, please—about anything. I don't want you even to shake hands with me, if you don't wish. I should be very glad if I could make you understand—that I am not that sort of man. I hope you will never have cause to regret——"

"Chris," she answered soberly, "I'm sorry, very sorry I've acted like this. But I'm overwrought, not myself. After all, it's a terribly important step for a woman. Especially when there's a child to be considered."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"WELL," said Mr. Petersen to himself, "I'm not the first nor the last!"

He was standing on the back porch, looking into the kitchen formerly Mrs. Hansen's immaculate kingdom. How changed, how sadly altered now! As if a huge maddened bumblebee had been flying about in it, knocking down everything, making all sorts of stupid mischief. Dirty pots and pans on the stove, the sink, even, unaccountably, on the chairs. And extraordinary things, which interested him, on the floor, egg-shells, toys, a pair of gloves.

Without the least trouble he could remember just how it had been nine or ten months ago, when Mrs. Hansen had ruled, when he had been a bachelor. Sighed, but not with bitterness. Order-loving and systematic as he was, he was not exasperated by the turmoil in his home, or by the dreadful meals. He had toward Minnie an absolutely boundless tenderness. For one thing, he could see that she always *tried*; her failure came not from laziness but from—he hesitated even to think it—from lack of intelligence, from a sort of obstinate stupidity.

Servants were hard to procure and Minnie never got on well with them. There were always scenes, in which Minnie was the perfect Defoe and the servant very impudent. She seemed to have an absolute talent for provoking impudence from the most unexpected sources. Furthermore, she would not pay good wages. She resented the very idea of a servant profiting by her work. It was one of her queer little parsimonies. So she was compelled to do most of the work of the house alone.

When she became quite submerged in the torrent of disorder, she called upon Mrs. Hansen, but grudgingly and ungraciously.

It was after six, and she hadn't begun even to consider dinner. He went upstairs and found her sweeping the big bedroom with frantic haste.

"Oh, Chris," she said, with a worried frown, "I know I'm awfully late. But I had a terrible headache, and I had to lie down almost all afternoon."

He put his arm about her shoulders.

"Oh, leave this!" he said. "You poor little soul! If you're well enough to get dressed, we'll go and have dinner at the Eagle House."

"But, Chris, the house! The kitchen!"

"Nonsense! I'll get Mrs. Hansen——"

"No, not that odious woman!"

"Someone else then. Come on, little Minnie! Put on your nice new dress! I'll find Sandra."

Finding Sandra was a recognised preliminary. Her mother never knew where she was. She roamed about the neighbourhood, dirty and beautiful, playing with whatever children she encountered, or, oftener, went quite alone on her expeditions. She was never hungry, and hadn't the least regard for meal times. Sometimes it sufficed to call her, sometimes Petersen went making enquiries.

He found her this time in the garden next door, talking with the old lady who lived there. As soon as she saw his kindly face she rushed up to him and sprang into his arms with the warm and silent affection she had developed for him, and which so enraptured him. He smiled apologetically over her head at the old lady, and carried her off. She was five now, and tall for her age, thinner than ever, and lovelier. She had lost the softness of babyhood, her little face was pointed, her features clearer. Mr. Petersen looked upon her with an ad-

miration that was almost awe. His feeling for this child was more than he could express, more than he could comprehend; something beyond any paternal affection. Minnie *loved* her, with a violent and indiscriminating passion, but he was privately convinced that Minnie didn't quite understand her, or quite appreciate her rareness. She would, he fancied, have loved any child she had borne with the same fervour.

"Well, Sandra!" he said, "are you hungry?"

"No, Uncle Chris."

So she always answered, and it always worried him. He had been disturbed to learn from Minnie that the child never drank milk, didn't like it. He found a very particular sort of cow out in the country and arranged with its owner to deliver daily a quart of its milk, and, with bribes and cajolery, got her to drink it.

"How much milk to-day?" he asked, as he did every evening.

"None. Because Michael tipped over the bottle just when Mother opened it, and *he* drank it *all* up, from the floor, like this."

She illustrated with a small tongue.

"Now then, that will never do! We shall have Michael growing bigger than you!"

That amused her, and together they constructed imaginary scenes with an enormous Michael.

"We're going out to dinner to-night," he said. "Uncle Chris will make you pretty, eh?"

So he carefully washed the little face, and combed her hair, talking to her all the while.

"What did the little girl do to-day?" he asked.

"I writed a letter to my daddy. I writes to my daddy every day."

He felt a great pity for her, and a generous pity for the man who had had to leave her forever. She often

spoke about her father, and in honour bound, Mr. Petersen encouraged it, although it wasn't altogether pleasant for him. He didn't like to be reminded of the dead Englishman whom he had supplanted.

"That's right," he said. "Remember your daddy."

The little girl was sitting on his knee while he buttoned her frock; she rubbed her silky head against his face and rested for a moment against him. He could hear Minnie in the next room, opening bureau drawers in a vain search for some of her perpetually lost belongings.

"Mother wrote too, to daddy," Sandra went on, "and I did post it in the high box."

He wondered casually whom Minnie had been writing to, then in an instant forgot all about it, for he heard her calling him in a queer, desperate voice:

"Chris! Chris!"

He hurried in to her. She had apparently begun to dress and then stopped; she was standing, leaning against the bureau, in a petticoat and a cheap little flannel dressing sack, her hair down.

"Chris!" she cried again.

"What's the matter? Are you ill? Shall I send for the doctor? Speak! What's the matter?"

"I know I'm going to die!" she whispered.

He was appalled.

"Die! Minnie, my dear, what is it!"

She collapsed in his arms; not in a faint, simply gave way, in a sort of dreadful limpness. He carried her to the bed and covered her up with a blanket, and stood looking down at her in helpless alarm.

"Shall I telephone the doctor?" he asked.

She nodded feebly, and he ran downstairs to do so. Then sat down by the bedside to wait. He would very much have liked to tidy the room a bit before the doctor came, but Minnie had clutched his hand tightly, lying

with closed eyes and rigid face. He felt himself disgustingly petty to be troubled by details, by corsets on the bureau, an underskirt dangling on the gas bracket, a window curtain secured only by a pin. . . . Nothing better should be expected from a woman in her condition. And what did it matter? He tried to concentrate his attention on Minnie, but unhappily his eye fell upon a sort of waste tract under the bed, where in a tangle lay fluffy bits of hair, mouse-like rolls of dust, torn letters, stockings, toys of Sandra's.

The doctor came and Petersen went downstairs to Sandra.

"Mother's not well to-night," he told her. "We'll see if Uncle Chris can't fix up some supper for his little girl."

Resolutely denying the emotions that were assailing him, disgust, impatience and despair, he went into the awful kitchen.

"It can't go on this way," he said, half-aloud. "Ill or not, she could surely . . . We'd better give up house-keeping if she can't find a servant. We'd better board."

And the emotions suddenly mastered him.

"This is filthy!" he cried. "This is horrible! You'd lose your soul in a mess like this! There isn't, there can't be any excuse for such a state of things!"

He came out of the awful kitchen, banging the door, and, in a whisper, telephoned for Mrs. Hansen.

Presently the doctor came down.

"She's in a very nervous state," he said, "but there's nothing physically wrong, as far as I can see. Morbid. Thinks she can't live through it. That she's going to die. Not unusual in her condition. If I were you, I'd see she didn't over-exert herself. Persuade her to rest more. Get a good servant, Mr. Petersen; you can afford it. Try to interest the little lady in sewing, books, that sort of thing."

Mr. Petersen went upstairs again, to find Minnie in tears. He told her what the doctor had said.

"But I don't *want* a servant!" she cried. "No, Chris! I'd far rather have the extra money."

"I'll give you the extra money beside," he assured her, in surprise. "You know, my dear, you only need mention——"

It wasn't the first time he had reflected on the subject of Minnie and income. He allowed her considerably more for housekeeping than Mrs. Hansen had had, and yet she couldn't manage. They had cheaper food, and not too much of it. She bought no clothes for herself, and only what was essential for Sandra. The entire tone of his life was lowered; broken articles were always replaced by something cheaper. It had more than once occurred to him that Minnie must be saving, laying up a little hoard on her own account, and it rather hurt him. She knew he had left her everything in his will, and he felt that she might certainly trust him while he was living. He was very generous with her, and never asked a question, once he had given her any money; but he hated waste and extravagance, and he had no intention of giving her too free a rein. His former idea of a wife who should be a comrade, to share equally in all he had, to be consulted and apprised of everything, had gone. Minnie was not a comrade, whatever else she was. Business could never be discussed with her. He couldn't even say, "We'll spend so much of our profits," or tell her what proportion he wished to save or to reinvest. He simply had to tell her, "I can afford so much and so much," and she would take it without comment. Her share of his money, as a woman, was all that she could get hold of; she didn't consider it a right or a privilege, but an opportunity.

He didn't resent that attitude; he was strong enough and large-minded enough to admit the exorbitant claims

of the weak. The only thing he did resent a little was her secretiveness. Her ruling instinct was to hide everything, to conceal her true thoughts, to distort her actions. She didn't like even to tell him what she had eaten for lunch. Her age remained forever dubious. She had curious reticences about different phases of her childhood. Her little prevarications he didn't so much mind; was rather amused by them. If she wanted to hurry him she ingenuously told him the time a half hour in advance of the truth. She gave him milk with his coffee and declared that it was cream. She told him things cost twice as much as they did, so that she could pocket the difference. And he, with a fatuousness by no means rare in this world, felt that there was no harm in these naïve little deceptions, was sure that in anything important she was quite to be trusted. If only she had talked more, confided in him more fully, he would have been entirely satisfied. Suspiciousness was utterly foreign to his kindly heart.

Although doubts were beginning to trouble him. . . . This "attack," for instance. He could not stifle a feeling that she had some object to gain by it. He wanted, of course, to be sympathetic, but it was not easy. After Mrs. Hansen had come, calm, polite but outraged, and had bathed and fed Sandra and got her to sleep, he went upstairs to sit with Minnie and found her lying flat on her back, her black eyes wide and troubled.

She turned to him sombrely.

"Chris," she said, "suppose I were to die?"

"I won't suppose it," he answered. "You mustn't allow yourself to be morbid."

"I'm not. Only there's always a risk. And I can't help thinking of Sandra. She hasn't anyone but me——"

"Don't you trust me, Minnie? Don't you know how fond I am of the child?"

"I know," she said, with a frown. "But I've seen so much of that sort of love. . . . You might die yourself."

"I've provided for that, as you know."

"Or,—I might as well be frank, Chris. When this other child comes, you'll feel very differently toward Sandra. You'll lose interest in her."

He was seriously annoyed.

"You ought to know me better——"

"I'm not blaming you. But a child of your *own*—it's altogether another thing. Oh, you'll see!"

Slow tears were running down her face.

"How can I help worrying? My poor little girl!"

"What would you like me to do?" he asked kindly. "I tell you I've provided for her in any event."

"I suppose there's nothing to be *done*," she answered. She turned her face to the wall and lay perfectly still. He waited until he believed her to be asleep and then went softly out. But he was amazed and horrified when, from the darkness of the hall, he saw her sit up in bed and fling her hands above her head, and whisper, with a ferocious distinctness he could not misunderstand:

"Oh, I *hate* your baby! I hate it! I hate it! I hope and *pray* it will die before it comes to rob my little girl! I hate your baby!"

He crept downstairs and into his study.

"It's her condition," he told himself. "She's not normal, hardly sane. . . . She didn't realise. . . ."

But his joy and pride in the child they were expecting had quite gone. Her distorted passion had tainted his healthy common-sense. A hated, unwanted child! In spite of himself, he began to see it as a monster, began to dread it. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I

It took a countless number of small details finally to arouse distrust in Mr. Petersen.

In the beginning, there was the roast chicken. Mrs. Hansen, who once more ruled the kitchen, came to him in great distress.

"Mr. Petersen!" she cried, "It's gone! The whole thing! A beautiful whole roast chicken I put into the ice chest with my own hands this very morning."

"Tramps," he suggested, "or Michael. Don't worry. Go and buy another."

And that marked the beginning. After that she missed something almost every day, and it nearly made her insane. She never talked of anything else; to Mr. Petersen, to Mrs. Petersen, to her own husband, or even to Sandra.

"It isn't tramps," she insisted. "There I've never stirred out of my kitchen the whole morning, and that loaf of bread's gone!"

She could not make anyone realise the magnitude of it, the hair-raising mystery. Minnie took the attitude that Mrs. Hansen must be and was mistaken; Mr. Petersen suspected Michael. The poor woman was desperate.

"All the years I've been here!" she moaned, "and never a bit of trouble like this!"

She was not superstitious, but the mystery began to terrify her; bread, meat, fruit, all sorts of things, vanished utterly, and with regularity. She considered Minnie grossly careless to take so little interest; the more she

saw of her, the more she despised her, anyway. On her return, Minnie had turned everything over to her, never so much as ordered a meal. She offended further by always sitting upstairs, just rocking or embroidering there in the bedroom, in a bedraggled wrapper, with her hair in an untidy knot, until late in the afternoon, when she made a supreme effort, dressed herself and went out for a walk.

Her appearance shocked Mrs. Hansen immeasurably, her brazen disregard for her "condition," her unsuitable clothes. Her treatment of Sandra, too. Such unwisdom she had never seen. The child was ailing half the time with colds and coughs; she was forever getting her poor little feet wet, and going about for hours in that way; she ate nothing, she moped, she was badly dressed, her hair was never taken care of, but fell over her face in a silky tangle, she didn't get nearly enough sleep. Mrs. Hansen did what she could for her, incurring Minnie's relentless hatred.

"I can't see how you stood that odious, interfering woman so long," she said to Petersen. "As soon as I'm well, she'll go, I can promise you!"

He tried to defend Mrs. Hansen, but with no success. And she, on her part, made as many veiled insinuations against her mistress as she dared. Mr. Petersen was not comfortable.

One evening he was sitting reading in his library while Minnie lay on the sofa with closed eyes and little Sandra was playing at his feet, talking in a low voice to her dolls. It was after nine; Mrs. Hansen had long ago cleared up and gone home to the new cottage—one of Mr. Petersen's—which her husband had bought upon Minnie's arrival. The house was quiet; there was for the moment a little peace, and Mr. Petersen was enjoy-

ing it. Then came a rap at the back door. He was surprised to see Hansen.

"Could I have maybe one, two minutes?" he asked solemnly.

"Of course!" said Mr. Petersen. "Come in! We'll sit down in the kitchen, not to disturb Mrs. Petersen. Now! What's wrong?"

Hansen took a chair in a manner combining Socialistic equality with the politeness due to a much richer man.

"It's this way," he said, "my wife she is badly upset about this business."

"What business?" Mr. Petersen enquired with a sinking heart, surmising another miserable disturbance between the two women, an unusually bad one if their men had to be dragged into it.

"Losing all these things. She thinks maybe you begin to suspect her."

Mr. Petersen's face flushed.

"Nonsense, Hansen!"

"Nonsense all right," said Hansen, with slow obstinacy. "But that's what she thinks. First one thing, then another is every day going."

His English grew more and more halting, but he wouldn't for worlds have used his and Mr. Petersen's native tongue. They must under all circumstances preserve the illusion of being Americans.

"For ten, twelve years you know us now, Mr. Petersen," he went on. "All the same, this is a queer business and my old woman she doesn't like it. She thinks maybe very soon you begin to suspect her."

"But I tell you I'd never suspect her," Mr. Petersen insisted.

"The Missis could."

"Nonsense!" he said again, but he made no impression upon the stolid Swede—nor upon himself.

"Anyway, Mr. Petersen, I want to pay you any time you are thinking my wife is taking something. Any time you would think she got a chicken or what, you just tell me, Mr. Petersen, and I pay you."

"But I tell you I'd never think so."

"Maybe sometime you could, Mr. Petersen."

Mr. Petersen understood what he meant.

"Here you are with a new wife, and what she thinks you're going to think before long," was what Hansen's tone implied, and he resented the implication. They talked a long time about it; neither gave an inch. Hansen's parting words were:

"Remember, I pay you any time, Mr. Petersen!"

And Mr. Petersen's:

"Nonsense!"

Nevertheless, he felt obliged now to consider this thing seriously. He sat alone in the kitchen and reflected until bed time, but couldn't reach any sort of conclusion. Mrs. Hansen was absolutely above suspicion, unless she had suddenly gone mad, and that he couldn't accept. Sandra never wanted food, and anyway, she would have been discovered. Michael had no opportunities, tramps couldn't remain invisible, stray dogs wouldn't rifle the apple barrel, wouldn't and couldn't be so nicely discriminating. His mind dwelt upon Minnie, he remembered things he had read or heard about morbid cravings for certain things to eat, about temporary mental derangements. . . . But that idea filled him with such alarm and uneasiness that he refused to consider it. He evolved a diabolic dog, actually invented excuses for it. . . .

II

The very next day he found out, quite by accident. He was going to lunch at the Eagle House with a rather im-

portant client and he hurried home to put on a clean collar and his cherished white flannel trousers, worn only on semi-official occasions. Minnie was taking a bath, so he didn't even call out to ask her where his things were. She wouldn't have known anyway. He was accustomed to searching patiently for every article when it was required.

He went through his own bureau drawers and his own closet in vain; then he went to look in Minnie's appalling wardrobe.

On the shelf there, lying on a piece of newspaper, behind her best hat, lay half a cold leg of lamb.

A corpse could scarcely have terrified him more. In a panic he seized his cap and rushed out of the house as he was; and Minnie never knew he had been home at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I

It may be said with perfect truth that Mr. Petersen was haunted by the leg of lamb; it gave him sleepless nights. He couldn't imagine why it was there. He would stop in the middle of serious work in his office, and contemplate the mystery. Could it be connected with her peculiar efforts at economy? Or a plot against Mrs. Hansen? Or absolute madness?

It was significant—more so than he realised—that he didn't dare to ask Minnie about it. At the bottom of his heart, in spite of his affection and admiration for her, he was perfectly aware that Minnie was a woman capable of anything and everything. There was nothing she wouldn't do. He went about for days, with the leg of lamb on his conscience, miserably imagining that he had in some way wronged Minnie by finding it.

The losses continued. But he never looked in the closet again. Imagination balked at the prospect. When Mrs. Hansen reported a dish of apple sauce and three pork chops missing, a dreadful vision of them behind Minnie's hat flashed across his brain. He tried his best to mollify Mrs. Hansen, to assure her that he knew she had no hand in the business. He felt intolerably guilty before that honest woman. He was a changed man, and he knew it. He had fallen into a sort of daze of astonishment, like a man who has undeniably seen a ghost.

An impossible situation, and ended by a still more incredible revelation. Quite by accident he learned where the leg of lamb and all its associates had gone.

Minnie's health was causing him a great deal of anxiety. She was in a perpetual state of exhaustion and worry, and refused to be relieved. It was one of her most sacred principles that it was not only meritorious but absolutely a duty for a domestic house-loving woman to tire herself out every day. In addition to doing a great many tasks which Mrs. Hansen had plenty of time and ability to do, she *would* take a walk every afternoon, even if it rained. The doctor said it was too much for her, advised her resting more, but although she listened to him sweetly, she said afterward to Mr. Petersen that *she* knew what was good for herself better than all the doctors on earth. She wouldn't even take Sandra with her on these walks; she said she had to be alone, for her nerves. Mr. Petersen warned her of rough characters from the brick yards and solemnly cautioned her to guard against being frightened; certain roads she was never to take, and she said she wouldn't.

So that he was alarmed and annoyed one day to see her crossing the railway tracks and starting off down the very worst of all the forbidden ways. He had happened to go over in that direction himself to see one of the comrades who wanted to build a house. At first he didn't believe his eyes; it couldn't be Minnie, in the dusk of a raw October day, deliberately and unnecessarily walking through that wretched quarter of drunken Slavs. But it was surely her hat . . . ! He hurried after her. She was a long way in advance, and before he had caught her up she had turned off the main road where the wretched hovels were, and entered a little wood.

It was quite dark there, under the trees, and very still; there was a faintly marked path, which the workmen sometimes used as a short cut to the brickyards in summer, but quite deserted at this time of the year. A mat of sodden leaves underfoot, and a damp reek of decay.

He was really angry at her morbid folly; such a place might well be dangerous. But just as he was on the point of speaking to her, gently, so that she shouldn't be startled, she rushed up to the dim form of a man who had materialised from the twilight. She kissed him several times.

Mr. Petersen was near enough to hear every word, although he could not distinguish the man. It was Minnie's voice which most astounded him—it was *not* her voice; it had tones he had never before heard, never imagined; it was gay, tender, full of a beautiful bravery.

"My darling boy!" she said, "I've only an instant. Is your cold clearing up at all?"

"How's Sandra?" he asked curtly. His voice was hoarse and weak.

"Splendid! I've brought you a little something to eat, dear. You must do all you can to keep up your strength. For just a little while longer."

"Oh, my God! Minnie!" he groaned, "I wish I were dead! And you too. And Sandra. It's too much for me——"

"Don't, don't, my dearest! Just a little while longer. I ought to go now, really. . . . But I can't leave you like this. Say one word to comfort me, dear. Tell me you'll be brave, just a little while longer."

"I am brave," he answered grimly. "If I weren't, I shouldn't be here."

Once more she kissed him.

"Good-bye, my dearest!" she said. "Keep up your courage! God bless you! I'll see you to-morrow as usual. And eat that nice beef, won't you? You need it so!"

She turned away and retraced her steps, through the wood and through the settlement. She was hurrying and

breathing painfully, and Mr. Petersen heard a gasping little sob now and then.

He was afraid of startling her too much by speaking just then. He waited until she was slowly climbing the hill above the tracks before he came up with her.

"Minnie!" he said as gently as possible, "*Who was that?*"

She looked at him wildly; her eyes made him think of a terrified horse, and she quivered like one.

"Chris!" she cried. "You didn't——!" And abruptly and mechanically began to scream, shriek after shriek.

"Stop! Stop!" he implored, in dreadful anxiety. "Calm yourself! Never mind! Don't tell me; only stop! Stop! Please, Minnie!"

She couldn't now. There in the road, where the Slav colony could hear her and coming rushing to witness, she had a frightful hysterical attack. Mr. Petersen sent someone after one of the old station hacks, and got her home at last. He was dripping with perspiration and altogether in a bad state when the doctor came; he was sure he had killed Minnie.

She was not allowed to talk that night; a trained nurse came and took charge of her, and kept Petersen out of the room. He didn't go to bed at all; he sat in his study, in dreadful anguish.

In the morning the nurse came down and told him he might see his wife for a few minutes. He tried to compose himself; he soaked his great yellow head in cold water until his hair lay sleek as a seal; he swallowed a glass of brandy, but nothing helped him. He so dreaded what he might hear.

Minnie loved that man. No matter what she said, she couldn't make him doubt that. Her words, above all, her voice . . . She must have been meeting that incredible, that unimaginable lover for weeks, feeding him

. . . He was not in the least angry at her. On the contrary he felt very, very sorry for her. But he did not want to see her, or to hear what she was going to say. If it were only possible for her to be restored to health and then to vanish!

He couldn't speak. He went over to her bedside and stood looking down at her. She was worn, pale, more troubled than ever. But she met his glance; she had not the look of a guilty woman.

"You'll have to be told now," she said. "I wanted to wait—but I suppose you wouldn't consent——?"

"You needn't tell me anything——" he began.

She closed her eyes wearily.

"You'd never trust me . . . He's my brother. We've never spoken of him . . . he's caused us a great deal of sorrow—disgrace, poor fellow. Through drinking. Father wouldn't let us see him, or mention him. And Grandma was just as harsh. Even Frankie turned against him . . ."

She paused a moment and feebly wiped the tears from her closed eyes.

"But I've always seen so much good in him. I've always been so fond of him, poor fellow! . . . So much good—going to waste!"

"But, Minnie, if you'd only spoken to me——"

"I couldn't. It wouldn't have been fair to him. He's very proud, in his way."

Mr. Petersen sat down beside her, and tried, in a long silence, to adjust himself to this. He was conscious of a great relief, a terrible burden being lifted from him. And a feeling of guilt in the presence of the poor little woman. How could he for an instant have suspected *Minnie*, respectable, conscientious, maternal Minnie, of having a lover! Filthy, vile, preposterous idea!

"We'll find a way to help your brother, my dear," he said.

She reached out a calloused and hot little hand and put it into his.

"Chris," she said, "what I want is to have him *here*. Under my eye. Where I can look after him. May I?"

"Of course, my dear."

"But, Chris, I want you to understand it *all*. It's such a difficult situation. For a man like him—brought up in the best schools in England——"

"In England!" exclaimed Mr. Petersen.

"Yes; Father liked the English schools best for boys. Alec's lived in England for years," she explained, a little impatient at the interruption. "He's quite an Englishman. But, listen carefully, Chris, please. It's going to be very hard to get him here."

"Why? Can't——?"

"You see, I didn't tell him I was married. He wouldn't have taken anything from me if he hadn't believed it was all mine. I told him I had a position . . . It will be a great shock to him, and he's far from well. If you'll only promise to do just exactly as I tell you, please, Chris!"

He was rather amused at her solemnity.

"Whatever you think is necessary," he said, indulgently.

"It is—very necessary. I've written a note, and I want you to take it to him in that same place in the wood this afternoon at five. And, Chris, *don't* talk to him, don't tell him anything—any single thing—until he's read it. Not *anything*. It's very important for him to learn it all from me—from the note. Promise!"

"Very well, my dear."

"You see, I know just how to manage him, so that he won't be too much shocked. And you'd better take your

pocket flashlight, or you'll be giving the letter to the wrong person."

II

Privately Mr. Petersen considered it a preposterous errand. He set off at half-past four with the note and made his way through the windy twilight to the wood. At first he couldn't find the fellow; at last he discovered him sitting on a fallen log a few feet from the path, sunk in apathy.

"Is your name Defoe?" he asked.

The man jumped up.

"What is it?" he asked. "Have you a message from her?"

Mr. Petersen handed him the note and the flashlight by which to read it, and with no little curiosity, tried to study his appearance in the little spot of light. But couldn't; could see no more than a thin, long hand clutching the letter. It seemed a long one.

Presently the flashlight was extinguished and the little wood was very dark, and still. Mr. Petersen respected the feelings of the sensitive brother for a long time, but he couldn't wait there all night.

"Shall we be getting along?" he said, pleasantly.

Out of the dark came that hoarse and pitiful voice.

"Who are you?" it asked.

"Petersen," he answered.

"The man—the man that Minnie——?"

"Her husband; yes. Are you ready?"

The man came abreast of him, and began walking by his side with weary and heavy steps.

"Is she so very ill?" he asked.

"No-oo," said Petersen. "Not very. Can't look for perfect health, I suppose, in her condition."

"What condition?"

"There's a baby coming in a few weeks, you know."

He was surprised her brother hadn't noticed; then reflected that he had only seen her in the dark.

"The doctor tells me there's no cause for worry," he went on. He was curiously anxious to reassure the fellow; he was moved by a great pity for him which he could not have explained. Simply that his voice, his manner, the very atmosphere about him, seemed tragic and terrible.

They went on toward the house, Petersen talking cheerfully, neither exacting nor expecting replies from his companion. They entered the hall, and he turned, for the first time, to look at him.

Like a madman, like a ghost, so deadly pale and haggard and ruined . . . He couldn't bear to look at him. He turned away, but found the image still in his eyes, the tall, lean fellow with his fine-featured face, his great grey eyes, so sunken and luminous, his straggling beard, his ruffled hair, all his shabbiness and wretchedness.

He wanted to propose a bath and a shave before going in to Minnie; the poor devil wasn't a fit object for her gaze. But he divined the morbid sensitiveness of the famished creature, and was afraid of hurting him. As he hesitated, little Sandra came in from the kitchen.

He caught her violently in his arms.

"Sandra!" he cried. "*Don't you know me?*"

She looked up into his face.

"No," she whimpered, frightened. "Put me down!"

III

His interview with Minnie was very brief, for the nurse sent him out without ceremony, and followed him downstairs.

"Mr. Petersen," she said, "I'm going to telephone for the doctor."

The two men looked at her in alarm.

"Is she worse?" asked Mr. Petersen.

"She'll soon be better," answered the nurse, with a smile.

Mr. Petersen caught her arm as she was going.

"You don't mean—it's beginning now?" he asked. "I thought—three weeks more at least——?"

The nurse smiled again.

"I shouldn't be surprised!" she said.

Mr. Petersen felt utterly frightened and helpless. He looked about in vain for comfort, saw only the very professional nurse, and Alec, more alarmed than himself.

"Will it be—bad?" he asked the nurse, but she went hurrying upstairs again. He followed her, but wasn't allowed to come into the room.

"You'll only make her nervous," the nurse told him, severely. "You must be sensible now, Mr. Petersen, and not worry me. I've got my hands full!"

So he went down again and met the doctor coming in. He, too, had the professional cheerfulness so difficult to endure.

"Take a drink," he advised, "and go out for a walk. We don't need *you*!"

He went back into his study once more, and was surprised to see the brother still there. He had forgotten all about him. He poured out a drink for him, too, and sat down, very glad to have someone with him. He became fictitiously cheerful to hide his anguish. And every time he heard a footstep overhead, his heart bounded horribly.

He poured out a second glass of brandy for each of them, and was sorry to see the misery on the face of the other, not to be dispelled by many drinks. He tried to

console him, said, after all, it was a perfectly natural thing—a beautiful thing. But didn't believe it himself. There wasn't—there couldn't be beauty in the bestial agony of a poor little woman. It was *natural* enough, natural as an owl crunching the bones of a rabbit . . .

Suddenly there was a long, horrible groan from upstairs. Mr. Petersen turned pale, and reached blindly for the brandy.

"My God!" he muttered. "This is——" But was cut short by a frantic clutch at his arm. The brother stood swaying like a reed; suddenly collapsed and fell at his feet unconscious.

IV

He was fully occupied with this other sufferer for a long time. He did all the proper things, threw water over him, slapped his hands, forced brandy down his throat, until he revived. Then he fetched Mrs. Hansen and she made him drink hot soup and eat bread and butter. There wasn't a sound upstairs. Resolutely Mr. Petersen kept his mind away from Minnie, and clung to Mrs. Hansen, followed her wherever she went. Her calmness, her ordinariness solaced, as well as the fact that she was a woman. He questioned her minutely about Alec and what she thought he needed, without listening to her replies. It was only her reassuring voice he needed.

"There now!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Petersen, the doctor's coming down."

"She's dead!" he thought.

But the doctor was smiling.

"A fine boy!" he said.

V

Presently, as dawn was breaking, the nurse came running downstairs to Mr. Petersen.

"You may go in for just a *minute!*" she said.

She was looking worn and jaded, and, for the first time, not immaculately neat. She was human now.

Mr. Petersen took it upon himself to invite Alec to come with him.

"It will do you good, my boy," he said.

So they entered the room together, together had their first glimpse of the newly-born little man. He was asleep, his red, wizened little face screwed up into a look of comical misery, his tiny dark-red claws stretched up. The nurse assured them that he was large and that he was healthy.

Minnie was lying flat on her back, with a long braid of hair over each shoulder, framing a very pale and grave face. She was exhausted and ill, but proudly victorious, aware that she had accomplished a masterly thing. Thus had she replied to all doubts or questions whatever that might arise within Mr. Petersen. She was the mother of his son; she had established a claim upon his heart and upon his conscience which he could never deny. He not only loved her, he revered her. A deep conviction, belonging to a somewhat old-fashioned brand of Socialism, of the "sacredness of motherhood," lay in him. Minnie had heard a great deal of it from him. It made her more than ever conscious of what a remarkable and praiseworthy thing she had accomplished. She looked at the two men with a worn yet sublime smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I

THE days that followed were the golden days of Mr. Petersen's life, the happiest he was ever to have.

Minnie was angelic. Her worry, her preoccupied air had gone; she was gentle, gay, affectionate. She didn't get well very fast and had to stay in bed for some weeks, but that was no burden; she liked it. With her tiny son beside her and little Sandra quietly playing nearby, she was contented and blissful for hour after hour.

She developed a great fondness for being read aloud to; all evening and part of the afternoon one of the two men could be seen sitting by the bed with a book. Her taste was astoundingly catholic; as a matter of fact, she didn't care in the least what was read, or pay much heed to it, so long as she could secure the uninterrupted companionship of one of her men. She only wanted to see them there, safe and happy.

Mrs. Hansen managed the house and Sandra to perfection. There wasn't a bother or an annoyance from one day's end to another. Except that Mr. Petersen felt a bit disturbed about the brother's state of health. He had taken a great liking to the fellow, and he hated to see him so despondent.

Theirs was a most curious companionship. He realised how curious some time later. Mr. Petersen had never before met a man of this class and type; he had been wont to despise them, to look upon them as hindrances to the Socialist scheme, and useless from any point of

view. Now he revised his ideas, in his open-minded fashion. Alec's education he couldn't admire; he really knew nothing at all, nor was he particularly intelligent. But his ideas were fine. They were not personal to him, they were nothing more than traditions, and yet Mr. Petersen was forced to admit that such traditions were quite as good, if not a great deal better, than anything which most men would have been able to work out originally. Principles of honour, of fidelity, of endurance. No matter that he didn't live up to his principles very well; who did, anyway? Mr. Petersen himself was aware of many betrayals of his own faith. The thing was to aspire.

What is more, he liked the personality of the fellow; his simplicity, his infinite gentleness with Sandra. Certainly he would have liked to see him more cheerful, still, he could very well understand this depression in a man well over thirty who had failed to make a living for himself. He proposed looking about for some opening for him, but Alec said, no thanks, he was going away in a day or so. He was reserved to the point of mysteriousness. Mr. Petersen used to discuss him with Minnie and ask her advice.

"You know him better than I do," he said. "What do you think would suit him?"

Minnie, as always incapable of answering a question, would say:

"But let's keep him here, anyway, Chris. It's the best place for him."

She had the greatest devotion for her brother, a devotion which Mr. Petersen fancied was not quite appreciated. He was so formal with the affectionate little soul. If she succeeded in kissing him good-night or good-morning, he would turn scarlet and actually frown at her. He never returned a caress, never spoke a tender

word to her. He seemed rather to avoid her. He was willing enough to read aloud, but if she interrupted him, and wanted to chat a bit, he lost his temper.

"Do you want me to read or *not*?" he would ask, menacingly.

Sombre and inscrutable, he withdrew into himself, disregarding even Mr. Petersen's always renewed offers of friendship. He treated Mr. Petersen with a respectful deference which would have been grotesque if he had not been so obviously sincere.

Sandra he loved passionately. It surprised Mr. Petersen to hear him upbraiding Minnie for her carelessness with the child. Her food, her clothes, her manners. He was always saying that she should be taken to church, and taught what he called "decent ideas," and Minnie always promised to comply when she grew stronger. She was invariably propitiating toward her brother, as toward someone she had wronged. . . .

II

The War broke out. With very little effect upon Brownsville Landing. "Let them fight it out," was the prevailing opinion; it was also stated positively that none of the nations had any clear idea of its aims or why it was involved. Even the Belgians were fools, who had rushed into war for no reason. There was a certain amount of awfully sentimental sympathy for the "Belgian babies," but it wasn't very effective. The Brownsville Landing natives looked upon the whole affair as a colossal folly, in which all the participants were equally guilty; the British perhaps a bit more reprehensible than the others. The old families, brought up on flamboyant traditions of "1776," looked upon the British with scorn and dislike, the Irish element with positive hatred, and

the great mass of aliens, with their obscure and vague affiliations, swallowed docilely the German propaganda fed to them. There was a wide-spread conviction that the Germans were invincible, if not superhuman, with amazing scientific devices impossible to resist. A sort of laboratory witchcraft, "secrets" and "discoveries" without limit. France was degenerate and vitiated; England gross, slothful, devoid of patriotism, Russia a farce; the whole affair wouldn't last long.

To Mr. Petersen, the European, the outbreak was of immense significance; it was the falling of Damocles' sword. He read the papers avidly. He was not partisan; he felt nothing but the passionate interest of an onlooker observing a mortal struggle between equally unpleasant adversaries. A struggle among capitalists. With the poor man dying, bleeding, suffering, whether victor or conqueror. He shook his head over the fate of the Continent.

It surprised him that Minnie's feelings were so vehement. She was absolutely furious that there should be a war. All those men should have known better. She didn't know or care what it was about; she declared it was shameful and wicked for so many people to be killed. She went so far as to weep over it. He knew Minnie well enough to guess at something personal in this fervour; an abstract interest was not possible for her.

Sure enough, it was a personal matter. It concerned her adored brother. He had evidently been telling her that he wanted to enlist, for one morning Mr. Petersen heard them at it, taking it up again with incredible obstinacy and indirectness on both sides.

"I won't let you!" cried Minnie. "I won't have it!"

"Good God! What do you want to make of me? Can't you *see*, even *you*, that it's the only way to rehabili-

tate myself? My only chance. I shan't lose it, no fear!"

"Don't you dare!" she cried hysterically. "I'll die! It would kill me!"

Mr. Petersen entered after Alec had gone out angrily, banging the door.

"Minnie, my dear," he said, mildly, "don't you think you're wrong to try to influence your brother in such a——"

"Oh, do stop!" she interrupted rudely. "You don't understand." And suddenly grew angry with him. "I should think you could see he's not fit for a military life. So thin and sensitive. How can you be so heartless."

Mr. Petersen remarked that if he weren't fit for a military life, he wouldn't be accepted, but Minnie said she knew all about *that*; they'd take anyone they could get hold of, even in a dying condition.

This marked the end of her period of sweetness. With her characteristic scorn for doctor's orders, she refused to stay in bed any longer. In a wrapper, thinner, pallid, and untidy, she pervaded the house, for the sole purpose of keeping her eye on Alec. She followed him about, scolding him, crying, tormenting him. He stopped arguing, he absolutely refused to answer her. He would sit, with a cigarette in his mouth, quite unmoved by her tirades.

It was undoubtedly a unique opportunity for the poor fellow to "rehabilitate" himself, as he put it, and Mr. Petersen couldn't understand why he hesitated. Surely no man owed so immoderate a duty to a sister. If he wanted to go, if he saw it as his duty to go, why in Heaven's name, didn't he go, and at once?

All of poor Minnie's loves were so inordinate. She was to Alec as she was to her children, utterly and blindly devoted, without the least discretion or scruple. He knew

that she didn't love him in that way, but he felt it was because he was independent, didn't need her so. Her whole life consisted in service for those weaker ones. The most superfluous services, that instead of helping hindered. She annoyed Alec by her futile and insistent attentions, by counting his cigarettes and deploring their number, by bringing him special dishes which were intended to fatten him. She denied Sandra nothing, no matter how injurious and stupid. She served her little son by carrying him in her arms continually, never let him alone in peace. Only to Mr. Petersen she did nothing but her duty, and not always that, though she didn't realise it.

The old disorder was re-established, on account of trouble with Mrs. Hansen.

Minnie came into his little room one morning, frowning.

"Chris," she said. "You'll have to tell that woman to go at once!"

"Who, my dear?"

"You know very well! That Hansen woman! *This* time she's surpassed herself. I never heard of such impudence. Never! There she was, the old—*creature*—snooping round in Alec's room. Snooping!"

Now Mr. Petersen had long been aware of this sole failing in an otherwise classically lofty character. He knew that Mrs. Hansen snooped. But, having no secrets, her snooping hadn't particularly disturbed him. He realised, too, that for one of Minnie's secretive nature, snooping must seem a crime; he knew by this time that *she* had plenty of things to hide, queer little magpie stores, money she imagined she was saving, clothes she had ruined in the making, bills she didn't wish seen. He thought it rather humorous.

"That's too bad," he said, soothingly. "Still—perhaps if you speak to her——"

"Indeed I shan't. *You* engaged her and *you* can get rid of her. I will *not* have her in the house. Poking her nose into everyone's affairs. She's got to go at once!"

She heard the baby crying and turned to go.

"I never did trust that woman," she said, turning back at the door. "I always felt there was something queer when we missed all that food last autumn."

Mr. Petersen was stricken dumb. To accuse poor Mrs. Hansen of that!

And such was the plausibility, the fatal assurance of Minnie's manner, that he was almost inclined to disbelieve the evidence of his own eyes, to deny the facts known to him, and to put his faith in her words . . .

She got another servant, a silly young girl, and between them they produced a masterpiece of discomfort and disorder. They quarrelled, too, in a distressing way; but were nevertheless conscious of a sort of bond. Mr. Petersen would hear Minnie in the kitchen preparing food for the baby and talking to Addie with interest, with animation, as she had never talked to Mrs. Hansen, who was so much more worth talking to. And Addie would reply as one woman to another. They used to discuss the war sometimes with deep indignation. Their opinions were identical. Addie's young man, who was a German with American citizenship, hankered after the Fatherland, and wanted to go home and fight, but Addie had told him firmly that if he did, *she* was done with him. He could find one of those fat German girls.

Minnie's housekeeping annoyed her brother very much. In fact, Mr. Petersen thought him unnecessarily fault-finding with the anxious little woman. She used to cry sometimes but she never resented anything he said. She would excuse herself by saying that the baby took up

so much of her time. And that was a new cause of offense. He accused her bitterly of favouritism, and even Mr. Petersen was obliged to admit a basis of truth in the accusation. She had an absolutely frantic passion for her little son; she was ready enough to be sharp and unjust to Sandra if she disturbed his inordinate demands for quiet slumber.

It was a beautiful, a wonderful baby, a lusty, blonde little Petersen with serene blue eyes and a sort of debonair quality; a baby no woman could be blamed for adoring. But she was so immoderate, so inordinately proud of having a son anyway. And when, combined with its superior sex, it possessed the attractions of this son, how withstand it? She expected Sandra to worship as she did, and Sandra refused. Sandra was annoyed with this superfluous child. As far as she was concerned it was useless, too young for a playmate and not docile enough for a toy. Moreover it received attentions which properly belonged to her. Uncle Alec alone confined his devotion to her.

He didn't want the little girl out of his sight. He spent many hours walking through the garden, holding her hand, listening to her, touching her misty hair. He couldn't play with her or amuse her as Mr. Petersen did, but she was able to love him even more. They had between them a rare and touching sympathy.

Mr. Petersen thought it charming. He often watched the grave little girl, sitting on the sofa beside the wretched man, reading aloud to him from her funny little books, which she knew by heart, sometimes stopping to run her little hand over his cheeks, or his beard, which amused her.

"Isn't *that* a nice one?" she would ask, ending some story about bears or wolves or fairies.

"Rather!" he would answer. "You're a very clever, good kid to read to me like that."

III

Mr. Petersen came home one day at noon, and found no trace of lunch. Addie was not in the kitchen, nor Minnie. The latter he could always trace by means of his son's voice, and he went up to the bedroom, to find her lying on the bed, exhausted, sobbing, while Addie bathed her forehead with cold water while she dandled the baby.

"Well, well!" he asked. "What's wrong now?"

"He *will* enlist!" cried Minnie wildly. "You've got to stop him! I won't have it. I'll die!"

"Pshaw!" said Mr. Petersen mildly. "This won't do!" He was a little annoyed.

"You must let a man do as he thinks right," he said.

"Right!" cried Minnie. "He's not thinking of that! He wants to get away—— He's made up his mind to get away from *me*!"

"Come, come! This isn't very sensible, my dear!"

"Neither are you!" she answered, unexpectedly. "You're the biggest fool in the world, Christian Petersen!" And began to laugh.

In the course of time she was calmed, and Mr. Petersen went downstairs to look for a bite to eat. He discovered Alec in the kitchen with Sandra, boiling eggs.

"Minnie been at you?" he asked.

Mr. Petersen admitted that she had.

"She'll have to get over it, that's all," said Alec. "I'm going! About Sandra—I've got something . . . a small income. . . . It isn't clear now; I've drawn against it for some time to come . . . but what there is, is for her. I . . . You'll look out for her, won't you, in case I——?"

She's—Minnie doesn't altogether understand her. Not so well as you do."

"I'll do my best," said Mr. Petersen, who was too kindly even to hint that he didn't need to be shown his duty toward Sandra by this poor failure. "You've really made up your mind then?"

"All the mind she's left in me!" he answered with sudden passion. "Good God! What does the woman want! She wants to own a man, body and soul. Wants me to hang about here a disgraced, ruined man, not even *trying* to—stand alone—— The most disgusting, despicable object under the sun—so that she won't be separated from me. Good God! If I'd ever thought I'd come to this, Petersen . . . !"

"Now then, my boy," said Mr. Petersen gently, "don't blame your sister too harshly. She's too much a woman to understand these things. And don't be bitter. You're a young man yet. You can——"

"No!" said Alec, "It's too late. You've only to look at me to see I'm done for. In every way. Physical as well as—moral. No good. Rotten all the way through. My only chance is to get into the army. If *they* won't have me, I'm finished."

He was so obviously excited that Mr. Petersen did not remonstrate.

"If I can help you," he said, "with your outfit, for instance, let me know. I'd be very glad. Or . . . if you need ready money——?"

Alec looked at him sombrely.

"Petersen," he said, "some day you'll understand. And I hope you'll—— But I can't expect it . . . Only, before I go, I'd like you to know that—I'm not so bad as I seem. —I—I *realise* . . . I hope I'm going to be killed. Perhaps that'll wipe out—this. You might—in that case—not judge me so—you might—have mercy . . ."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I

MR. PETERSEN was thankful to escape from the house the next morning. After what a night! No sleep for anyone; even the baby had been awake and crying half a dozen times.

Minnie had opened her attack on Alec. Mr. Petersen heard her, hour after hour, raging, crying, pleading with him in his room. Time after time he had tried to go out, but she would spring in front of him and bar the door.

"You've *got* to listen to me!" she shrieked.

At last, very reluctantly, Mr. Petersen felt obliged to intervene. He knocked on the door two or three times unheard, for the storm was raging wildly. Then he turned the knob and walked in. Minnie was on her knees, clasping Alexander tightly, while he stood, white and cold, not even looking at her.

Mr. Petersen was shocked and for the first time angry at Minnie.

"Get up!" he commanded. "This is disgusting!"

She turned her face, blistered with tears, to him.

"Don't, don't, *don't* let him go!" she cried, "Chris, for Heaven's sake——!"

He made the fatal mistake of trying to argue with her. He was quiet and reasonable, and she aped his manner to perfection. Argued with him, the distorted and plausible arguments of a madwoman, became quiet, scornful. She involved him in a maze, bewildered and

confounded him, and made it more and more difficult for him to keep his temper.

Alec gave him sound advice.

"It's no use talking to her," he said. "She never *listens*."

They all became violent and rude. Sandra waked up and came running in, barefooted, wide-eyed, pale, stood listening for a long time. Then the baby began to cry again and Minnie hurried to it, but when Alec tried to escape downstairs, she flew after him, baby in arms, and again barred his way.

An awful night! Mr. Petersen unlocked his office and sat down with a great sigh. Never suspecting the far more awful night that was drawing in upon him. The climax, which so strangely and regularly occurs in human affairs, the definite point of departure, of division between the old days and the new, was approaching. His doom drew near.

He had just begun to lose himself in his business papers when there was a rap at the door. It was too early for Miss Layne; he was rather surprised; he called out "Come in!" and the instrument of fate entered.

It was Frances.

He was astonished and pleased. He had always admired Frances. He brought forward a chair.

"Miss Defoe!" he exclaimed. "It's been a long time since I've seen you!"

"Five years, nearly," she answered with a sigh and a smile. "But you haven't changed a bit!"

She had, he thought; she had improved. She looked older; no longer a girl, but straighter, more vigorous, more nobly honest than ever. Her face was a little cold in its severe, composed beauty, but not at all hard. A woman who expected a great deal, but who also forgave a great deal. She was dressed very plainly but with dis-

tion, with pride. He could see no sort of resemblance to Minnie.

"And where have you been all the while?" he asked.

"Out on the Coast. I went out as a doctor's secretary. Then I helped him with some research work. He recommended me to other doctors, so I set up a little office of my own. For very special sort of work. Only medical. Compiling and revising and translating books and articles doctors wrote. I was doing very well. I'd got quite a reputation in my line."

He admired her modest pride, her simple assumption of his interest in her affairs. He praised her enterprise.

"I like it. It's been very interesting. And profitable. And I've learned a great deal. I've watched operations. I've even helped doctors in an unofficial way. Especially with children. And now I've come East again to see if I can't get into the war somehow. I'm not a nurse, but I could train for special work. I've lots of letters to all sorts of people. I think I could be useful somewhere."

"I should think so," he said, thinking to himself that such a woman would be useful in any place. Their eyes met in a glance almost affectionate, a regard made up of memories of the old days of faithful work together, of their old respect and esteem.

"I wanted," she said, with a smile, "to have another look at Brownsville Landing, and Mr. Petersen. I've *always* remembered you. I think, in the old days, I didn't quite appreciate you, and I wanted—it's sentimental, isn't it—but before I went to Europe I wanted to come back and say thank you, for all the many, many kind things you did for us. I don't think any of us *realised*—Only now, after I know the world a little better, I'm able to judge you a little better."

He turned scarlet with delight and confusion. He

had never before heard such words, never received acknowledgment of his generosity.

"I had to tell you," she went on, "in case I didn't come back . . . I've seen a good many people in these last years. I've learned what to expect, more or less. And I can see *now* how rare it was—the way you treated us. There we were, living on your bounty, and turning up our silly noses at you. Silly, shabby little snobs! Only we didn't know any better. We didn't know anything at all. We really weren't able to appreciate——"

"Please stop!" he said, laughing, "I can't listen." He was silent for a minute.

"You make me very proud and happy," he went on, at last. "What I did was nothing. I had a great regard for your family. And I sincerely regretted all your misfortunes. I . . . It's very kind of you to speak to me in this way——"

He held out his hand.

"Thank you again," he said. "You don't often find people willing to express a good opinion of one. Bad points—mistakes, *they're* mentioned fast enough——"

"Don't I *know*!" she cried, grasping his huge paw.

"Now!" said he, still beaming, "You'll come home with me and see Minnie, won't you?"

"Minnie! Here?"

"I forgot you didn't know. I'm married to Minnie." Frankie's face turned quite white.

"But—married to Minnie! But . . . I thought—Mr. Naylor . . . ?"

"He died," said Mr. Petersen. He knew nothing about Frankie's connection with the dead man, or he wouldn't have been so unconcerned. As it was, he was distressed at the change that came over her face. It was quite distorted for a minute, with grief, with anguish, with a terrible resentment.

"Died!" she repeated. "I didn't know!"

He saw that there was something in this unknown to him. He kept silent.

"And then she married you. Soon after, I suppose?"

"I don't know," he had to answer. "I never asked her."

She looked squarely into Mr. Petersen's eyes.

"I was engaged to him once," she said, "until Minnie took him away from me."

She was still for a moment.

"I ought not to talk like this to you," she went on. "It's not fair. Only . . . I thought I'd got over it . . . and all the time, it . . . was there. I . . . feel so—*cheated!*"

Her fine mouth quivered.

Mr. Petersen rose.

"Come," he said, kindly. "Come home with me now and see Minnie. Perhaps she'll have something to say to you."

"I couldn't. I couldn't *speak* to Minnie."

"I'm sure you could," he answered. "I wish you'd try. Give her a chance to explain. Perhaps there's a misunderstanding. And even if there isn't, you're . . . I'm sure you're able to come. Please!"

She got up with a sigh.

"I might as well," she said, "one can't go on forever being cynical. It's all over, long ago."

They went out together on to the Main Street, busier, more prosperous now, but still familiar to her. She walked by his side, with her fine, free stride, so very different from Minnie's anxious bobbing. They passed the Eagle House and turned the corner.

"Oh!" cried Mr. Petersen, suddenly. "There's a piece of good news too. Your brother is with us."

"I haven't any brother," said Frances.

"Your brother who was in England."

"But I never had a brother!"

"Your brother Alec!" he said, quite loudly.

"I never knew anyone called Alec in my life."

Mr. Petersen stopped short and grasped her arm.

"Please, Miss Defoe," he said, "try to recollect your brother. It—it's very important!"

She looked at him with a puzzled frown.

"I'm sorry, but I never had a brother. Minnie and I were the only children. What made you——?"

He looked terribly shocked. He couldn't go on, but remained stock still in the street, wiping his brow with an enormous handkerchief.

"Of course," he said, in a stunned sort of voice, "it's some—some kind of—misunderstanding. We'll soon clear it up. Nothing to *worry* over."

But she could see how terribly worried, how filled with dread and horror he was, and she too grew apprehensive.

"I wish you'd explain!" she entreated.

"Wait! We'll be home in a minute!"

"Was there someone who pretended to be our brother?"

"Minnie said he was . . . I . . . it will be cleared up in a minute or two now. Nothing to worry over."

But he was absolutely panting, wiping his streaming face as if in the thick of some tremendous exertion.

They went on down the quiet old street, to Mr. Petersen's beloved home. It did not look at all as it had in the old days, when Frances used to go there for books; the curtains were dirty, blankets were hanging out of an upstairs window, and a baby's toys littered the porch.

"Is there a baby?" Frances asked.

"Two," he answered. "One of—his, and one of mine."

She smothered a bitter sigh, and went with him through the gate, up the walk and into the house. The sitting-room was empty, and very dirty; no one in the dining-room, where the breakfast dishes still stood.

"They're in the garden, I dare say," said Mr. Petersen.

They hurried through the vile kitchen and down the back steps.

"There!" shouted Mr. Petersen, pointing to the end of the grape arbour. "There's Minnie and your brother!"

Frances gave a shriek that horrified him, that caused the two at the end of the garden to look up suddenly:

"Her brother!" she cried, "Oh, Mr. Petersen! *Mr. Petersen!* It's her *husband!*"

BOOK FOUR: THE DESTRUCTION OF
LIONEL

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ONE might imagine a sort of allegorical picture of Minnie's progress. There would be Minnie, in her triumphal chariot, dressed in modern garments for the reason that her rather short and matronly form would in no wise be suited by any classic costume; she would be standing upright, her expression anxious but resolute, driving with careful skill the twin steeds which had carried her so well—Sex and Wilfulness, the latter with a single eye. Before her walk slowly the victims dedicated to sacrifice on her altar, Sandra and little Robert. Their poor little faces bear the shadow of their destiny. Behind her walk Frances, erect as ever, but incurably wounded—the woman robbed of her one love,—and Mr. Petersen, the honest man despoiled of his good repute. And tied to the car itself, dragged stumbling in her wake, stripped to the scornful gaze of the populace, ruined, broken, is Lionel, fastidious ruler of a tiny kingdom forever lost to him, shorn of all his pride and prestige, most pitiable of all her victims.

And she never glances back; her gaze is steadfastly forward, toward the future, where her children will surely suffer and die. She never looks to one side or the other, sees nothing of what she passes, neither the black valleys where lie bleaching bones, or the windy hill tops, bright and beautiful. Never hears a friendly hail or a warning cry, or a call for help.

In fact, I think that when at last she comes to the end of her journey, she will not know at all where she has been.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I

THIS is the story Lionel would have told, if he could. But, poor devil, he was as incapable of explaining himself as if he had been a creature from another planet. Even the few extenuating circumstances of his case he was never able to bring forward. He had always taken pride in his reticence, in concealing his sentiments. And from having lain ignored so long, they had grown unfamiliar to him, he didn't know them when they came forth. Didn't actually recognise his own feelings, past or present. He saw only that he was guilty; he accepted that sentence, not pleading his own weakness even to himself.

Poor devil! Poor devil! He never even knew that he had been the innocent victim of a most cruel seduction.

II

His martyrdom had begun on New Year's Day, when he had gone to meet Frankie's train, and Frankie had not come. He had returned for the next, two hours later, in vain, and for all the others, until late at night. He had eaten a wretched little supper in a cheap restaurant nearby and gone home to bed. He was stunned; he couldn't believe in his misfortune.

Next morning a telegram came.

"Cannot return. Writing.

FRANKIE."

He hadn't a penny. He sat in his room all day wait-

ing for the letter, which reached him in the last mail that evening.

"My dearest boy," she wrote, "the most dreadful thing has happened. My sister has gone away and of course I can't leave Grandma alone and helpless. I am trying my best to think of some plan, but oh, Lionel, I am so worried about you! I enclose five dollars, which is all I have. I can't imagine how you will make out. I have written a special delivery to Miss Eppendorfer to send me my salary, and I will forward it to you the instant it comes. My dear old boy! This is so miserable! Minnie has found some sort of place for herself, and says she is going to stay there for a year. I am thinking and thinking what I can do. Take care of yourself, my dear.

Always your

"FRANKIE.

"P.S. Minnie is at my aunt Mrs. Lounsbury's, 226 Lenover Street, Brooklyn. You might go to see her and see if you can persuade her to come home. I don't think it will do the least good, but it won't do any harm to try."

He went that very evening, used Frankie's five dollars for a taxi, in order to make a good impression. It was a raw, wet night, fit for his desperate mood. He was determined to *force* the beastly, selfish sister to release his Frankie.

The taxi went across the bridge, over the mystical river, shrouded in fog, and turned into an avenue where trolleys crashed by and elevated trains thundered overhead, where fruit stalls did a brisk business with swarthy foreigners; a slum, he called it. He watched from the window in vain to find any place possible for an aunt of Frankie's to inhabit. Then abruptly the driver swung round a corner, and left the unsavoury turmoil for a dark and quiet street, paved with cobblestones. A wind was blowing from the nearby river, bringing a dreary

din of horns and whistles; there was no other sound, no traffic, no footsteps.

"No. 226," said the driver. "Here you are!"

He got out, paid the fare with his last bill on earth, and climbed the steep flight of steps to the front door. There was an old-fashioned bell to be pulled; he heard it jangle inside. He waited in the wretched drizzle a long time, then rang again. The house was quite dark and the street too; the blurred lamps showed nothing but glistening cobblestones and pavement, and one stealthy cat slinking past. He shivered and sighed.

At last the door was opened and a head peered out cautiously.

"Well?" enquired a feminine voice.

"May I see Miss Defoe?" he asked. "It's Mr. Naylor."

"Come in!" said the voice.

He entered a narrow hall, lighted by a "Turkish" lamp, a pierced iron sort of thing, in which a feeble jet of gas burned. His guide turned to the right and lighted another gas jet, revealing a vast drawing-room, all the furniture shrouded in covers.

"Sit down," she said, pleasantly. "I'm sorry you had to wait so long, but we go to bed very early, and the servants can't hear the bell, up on the third floor."

He asked again for Miss Defoe; he had no interest in anything else.

"I'm Miss Defoe," said she. "What can I do for you?"

He scarcely looked at her.

"I've come to *see*——" he said, "to try to influence you if possible to——"

"I suppose to go back and let Frankie come to the city again," she interposed. "I'm sorry, but I can't do it."

"I don't think you realised what you were doing," he said. "If you had, you wouldn't—you couldn't—have cut us off this way, without any warning. It was——"

absolutely inhuman. Did you know that your sister and I intended to be married?"

"She mentioned it," said Minnie.

Her calmness infuriated him.

"Let me tell you!" he cried, "that I won't submit to this. I'm going out there on Sunday and I shall try to persuade her to marry me at once."

"She can't. She can't leave Grandma."

"She's not called upon to sacrifice her entire life to her grandmother, is she?"

"No," said Minnie slowly.

She was thinking very hard.

Lionel changed his tone.

"I say! Miss Defoe! Please try to realise! You're—I'm sure you don't want to separate us—— You don't want to make your sister suffer. She's always spoken so affectionately of you. You know she wouldn't treat you this way. Let her come back and marry me, and as soon as I'm on my feet a bit, I'll do *anything* for you—anything you like."

Minnie did not answer, or raise her eyes. She was still thinking. It was intolerable for her to be looked upon as heartless and selfish by this very nice young man. He pleased, he charmed her; she determined to appear well in his eyes. She was always inordinately sensitive to blame; it was vital to her to be admired by everyone. She didn't so much intend to lie, as to idealise herself, to show him the Minnie she felt he would respect.

She found her note, with her unerring instinct.

"I don't want to hurt you," she said, hesitatingly, "but I must be frank. You see, Mr. Naylor, Frankie's nothing but a child. She's so impulsive and unreasoning. She's not practical like I am. That's the reason I *had* to do as I did. I couldn't stop her any other way."

"Do you mean you—did this on purpose?"

"Why, of course. She told me . . . forgive me for mentioning it . . . how very poor you were—and I *couldn't* let her make such a marriage. Not that way, so rashly—and a man we'd never seen. She will never listen to reason. I begged her to wait, even a little while; I didn't want her to throw herself away. The only way was to make her a sort of prisoner, as I did. Aunt Irene had said ages ago that I could come here as her companion any time I wanted, so I packed up my things and went off at once. Then I intended to see you and—find out something about you."

"Frankie doesn't know you came for that reason—to prevent her marrying me," he said, in a crestfallen way.

"I suppose not; she's very hasty in her judgments. I suppose she puts it all down to selfishness and hard-heartedness. It doesn't matter though, so long as I've saved her."

He had not a word to say. Minnie had accomplished her favourite piece of magic, had made her opponent feel utterly guilty, had quite put him in the wrong. He was ready to believe that Frankie had been "saved" from a penniless and highly undesirable suitor.

"You don't know what Frankie is to me," said Minnie, improving as she went on, "there's nothing—*nothing* I wouldn't do for her. I do wish she didn't misjudge me so. She'll never know how hard it is for me, how I hated to leave home. I'm not like her—adventurous and enterprising. I was happy there on the farm, with the animals. And Grandma," she added hastily.

"Well, you see," said Lionel, weakly. "You didn't explain to her. How could she help——"

"How could I explain!" she answered, reproachfully. "Only think how self-righteous and disgusting it would have sounded. Besides, she wouldn't have believed me. And she would have thought that she knew what was best for herself. It would only have made more trouble."

Lionel was no longer indignant and resolute; he was becoming more and more uncertain of himself, more and more apologetic.

"But," he protested, "now we can't see each other at all. It's not only a question of getting married at once; it means that we're to be *entirely* separated. Don't you think that's unnecessarily harsh?"

"There's no reason why you shouldn't go out to see her."

He flushed.

"Not very well," he said; "at the present time, I'm rather—hard up."

"I should be glad to lend——" Minnie began, but he frowned.

"Thanks, no."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Minnie, "that you haven't even the train fare to Brownsville Landing?" Her tone was blunt but kindly; quite that of an elder sister. "And you're talking of *marriage*, Mr. Naylor!"

"I have a small income," he protested, "only the next quarter's not due just yet."

Minnie smiled her rare smile, and it warmed his heart. A smile so simple, so good-natured, so illuminating her dark and serious face.

"I'm afraid you don't manage very well," she began, when a very shrill old voice interrupted her, calling from the top of the stairs.

"Minnie! Minnie! What's all this?"

"I'll have to go," said Minnie, with a sigh, and held out her hand. "Mr. Naylor, I'd like to say a great deal more. You mustn't look on me as your enemy by any means! Quite the contrary. If you and Frankie will trust to me a little—I could meet you to-morrow afternoon, on the downtown corner, about four. I'd like to talk to you more fully."

He had no chance to answer, for she had hurried from

the room; as he let himself out of the front door, he saw her running up the stairs to the disagreeable old voice.

Then he went out into the fog again, unreasonably comforted, unreasonably hopeful.

III

Of course he was waiting for Minnie the next day as she had appointed. She was late, as she always was, and Lionel had grown a little impatient.

He had much he wanted to say, a number of arguments he had arranged during the night. He couldn't remember Minnie very well, but he had gained a vague impression that she was a kindly, pleasant little body, a bit meddlesome and without distinction, but *nice*. He felt that he could manage her. She had smiled very good-humouredly. He was far from despairing.

But he couldn't help remembering so many other times when he had been waiting for his own dear girl, bright, brave old Frankie! Every memory of her was a pain; he could not endure to think of their parting, and her face, so hopeful, so full of tender anxiety for him. He longed so for her, for the support of her love and her courage. No one else would do, no other voice console him.

At last he saw Minnie coming, a queer, dowdy little figure in black, hurrying toward him with short, bobbing steps.

"I'm sorry!" she said, breathlessly, "but it's not easy for me to get away . . . Shall we walk? There are nice quiet streets about here."

"Just as you please," he answered. Some of his hopefulness had left him after the first proper daylight look at her. Her appearance was so discouragingly adult and reasonable; so altogether foreign to romance. She was not smiling either.

He began resolutely.

"Miss Defoe, I don't think you quite understand the——"

"Oh, I *do*!" she assured him, earnestly. "Indeed I do! I've thought of nothing else since I heard of it. Mr. Naylor, I want to help you and Frankie. I want you both to be happy. But I don't—I *can't* think it wise for you to marry just now. I don't in the least want to separate you entirely. That would be cruel. I only want Frankie to wait until you are—more—better . . ."

"I understand."

"I wish very much you'd let me lend you enough to go out and see her——"

"Miss Defoe!" he said sternly, "I said before I can't listen to that."

She laid her hand on his arm and looked up into his face with a troubled frown.

"Mr. Naylor! It's just as Frankie's sister I'm speaking. . . . It's only because I want to *understand*. I'm practical, much more so than Frankie. Won't you please tell me just how—just what your income is—what your prospects are?"

She watched his face.

"Please don't resent it," she said. "It's not curiosity!"

"I'm sure——" he answered, with vague politeness. But nevertheless he did resent it; that was Frankie's business and his business, and *not* Minnie's. She held them both in her power, however, and he was obliged to answer her.

"I've about five hundred dollars a year," he said stiffly, "that's all. I'm looking about for a job of some sort."

"What business have you been in?"

"None. Except for a few weeks with my brother."

"Can't he help you?"

"No . . . Not exactly. We're not on good terms."

"That's too bad! What do you expect to find? What sort of job?"

"I don't know. Frankie used to suggest things. She knew the country better than I, of course."

"Poor Frankie! And that's what you were counting on—*some sort of work!*"

She sighed.

"I'm sorry for you. You don't know the trouble you'll have."

He was nettled, as she meant him to be. Her intention was to make him feel a fool, to show him the utter folly of Frankie's ideas. He could not bring himself to tell her that Frankie had intended to keep her own position, he was ashamed of that. He felt that Minnie despised him, and he didn't blame her.

He thrust his hands into his empty pockets, and silently cursed the universe—and Minnie. He hadn't even money for his dinner. Not a sou. And no Frankie to advise him. He had a sudden terrible feeling of desolation.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned.

"What is it?" asked Minnie.

"I suppose . . . I haven't any right to think of Frankie. I suppose—if I let her alone, she'll forget me, and make a better match out there."

Minnie knew what the matrimonial prospects were in Brownsville Landing; still she looked grave.

"One can never tell," she said. "Still, Mr. Naylor, I certainly shouldn't give up hope if I were you. I'd only think of the marriage as postponed. Until you're doing—better."

"That's all very well. But to be on the point of marrying a girl like Frankie, and then to lose her, for an indefinite length of time—it's not easy."

"But she's worth waiting for!" cried Minnie, like a good sister.

"Yes," he answered, bitterly, "but I'm not. Look at me! I haven't a penny in my pocket, as I stand here. Not much better than a beggar."

It was his old black depression, which he had grown accustomed to having assuaged by Frances. And now there was no Frances, and no encouraging words.

They had been strolling through moribund streets for some time, and were now back at the corner where they had met.

Minnie held out her hand, in a shabby glove that Frankie *could* not have worn.

"Good night!" she said, "and please give me your address. I want to think things over, seriously. You'll hear from me very soon. . . . And in the meantime, won't you write to Frankie? Tell her all I've said. Perhaps she'll listen to *you*."

He went back to his room completely crushed. He was a fool, Frankie was a misguided and romantic girl; there was no light in the world. They would never, never be able to marry. He sat down and wrote as Minnie had suggested.

Frankie, reading the letter, had no way of knowing how he felt, writing it. She couldn't see him, or read his heart, and the very deepest love gives no key to the beloved's mystery. It was a genuine act of self-sacrifice on his part. He felt it his duty to point out all the drawbacks and penalties of such a marriage, as seen through the eyes of Minnie and the world; all the old obstacles she had so gallantly disdained, and a host of new ones, born of his own despondency and humiliation, and of his lack of food. She could read in it only reluctance and coldness. It hurt her beyond measure.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I

HE woke up the next morning dizzy and sick, and quite obsessed by the question of food. Marriage and love were relatively unimportant. Not that he was hungry, at all, only dreadfully empty and weak, and frightened about his condition. He wondered if it were possible for a person of his class really to starve to death, whether his pride, and his love for Frankie were strong enough, if he could hold out, and not turn to Horace.

"What in God's name can I do?" he asked himself. "Ten days before I have a penny! Ten days!"

His mind dwelt persistently on one of those cheap, white-tiled restaurants, crowded with people, places formerly despised. If only there were a quarter in some forgotten pocket!

He had nothing to read, not even a magazine. No one to speak to. Not an earthly thing to do. He lay down on his bed and dozed away hours in a half-stupor. He began to imagine that he was already starving.

The next morning a letter slid under his door, as he had expected. But it was not the hoped-for letter from Frankie; it was from Minnie, and it enclosed a ten dollar bill. She wrote as his grandmother might have written—spoke of the difficulties of a young man, a stranger in the city. "Repay me when you are able," she said, and signed herself "Frankie's sister."

He was furious.

"I suppose she thought I was hinting at a loan when

I told her I hadn't a penny in my pockets," he thought. "She has no more sensitiveness than a rhinoceros."

But in the end, he kept the money, knowing he could pay it back in nine days. And wrote at once to Minnie, thanking her. He made up his mind that he would never, never face her again. He would return the money by letter, and she shouldn't hear of him again until he was a successful man and able to marry Frankie. His attitude at this future time would be amused, tolerant, very superior. He was horribly ashamed of himself for taking her money; it poisoned every mouthful he ate. He didn't like her anyway; he was afraid of her. Neither was he grateful. Instinct was warning him of a snare.

II

There was another note from her the next day.

"Dear Mr. Naylor: If possible, will you please come to tea this afternoon at four? I want particularly to see you.
MARY DEFOE."

He wrote a curt reply, that he was too busy, then, thinking better of it, tore that up, and wrote another one, accepting.

He was annoyed with her and her persistence, but, after all, she was Frankie's sister, and the arbiter of Frankie's fate.

Punctually at four he presented himself at the front door of the dismal old house, and was admitted by a lean, elderly maid. She showed him into the same enormous sitting-room with shrouded furniture.

"Miss Defoe will be down in a minute," she said, severely.

The place had a sort of chill magnificence which impressed him; he was fond of magnificence, anyway. Minnie increased in importance through being able to re-

ceive him in such an environment. He had been inclined to think her very ordinary, an opinion not to be held of the niece of such a drawing room.

It was the stillest house imaginable. Not a sound of any sort. He sat uneasily on a mammoth sofa, with nothing to hear, nothing to see but pictures muffled in netting, nothing that he cared to think about. His watch had gone long ago, and the marble clock on the marble mantelpiece had stopped . . .

At last there was a faint rustle overhead, and then the sound of very slow steps on the stairs, and in a minute Minnie entered, leading by the arm a frail little old woman in black silk, a nervous, pampered shadow of former elegance.

And this old lady remained in the room until Lionel went away. She was polite enough in her own peculiarly unpleasant way, and she evidently regarded his visit as a call upon herself, a compliment which she appreciated. Tea was served, very weak tea, too, with limp little biscuits; the old lady chattered banal and ill-humoured comments on news of the day, and at last the room began to grow dark, and Lionel took his leave.

She rose and held out a feeble old claw.

"Come again!" she said, and meant it, he knew. "We don't see much company."

He went away puzzled and annoyed. Why had Minnie sent for him? She had scarcely spoken a word to him, hadn't given him a significant glance. He couldn't understand, couldn't guess at her object, but he felt quite sure that she had one, and that it was one he didn't like.

III

Lucky for him he didn't know her object, or see the sword suspended over his head. He had enough trouble

as it was, poor fellow. When he got home, there was his eagerly expected letter from Frankie.

"My dear Lionel," she wrote, "I see that you have evidently changed your mind, and that you consider our former plan wild and impracticable. No doubt you are right; at any rate I shan't urge you or try to influence you. I am sure that anyone as prudent and cautious as you will get on in the world. I hope so, sincerely. Please look upon yourself as not bound in any way.

"Always your friend,

"FRANCES DEFOE."

He knew the answer to that letter—to take the first train, to hurry to her and take her in his arms, to tell her how he had longed for her and missed her. He read her hurt in every word, and it made him desperate. He swore to himself that somewhere and somehow he would get the money to go at once and marry her. Then he didn't care what happened, even if they had to be separated, even if Frankie stayed with her grandmother for months while he tried to find work. He knew, absolutely *knew*, that there was no time to be lost.

He went off at once to Horace, but Horace and Julie had gone on a motor trip for ten days. Then he took a bold step. He telephoned to Minnie.

Her pleasant, troubled voice answered the telephone.

"Miss Defoe," he said, "I need five dollars more, badly. Will you——?"

"Wait!" she answered, and after a pause, in a lower voice, "At the same corner—at five."

IV

The poor idiot had made up his mind to throw himself on Minnie's mercy, to confide in her, and he did.

"I can't stand it!" he told her. "It's too much—it's

breaking her heart. And it's—too much for me. Sensible or not, it doesn't matter. You're a woman, you ought to understand. I—I beg you to help us. To—have pity. I . . . I'm not much good at talking—but if you knew how I—care for Frankie, and what she is to me . . . We—it's not right, by Jove! It's not *right* for us to be separated. I'm no good without her. I need her. If I have her with me, I'm sure I can amount to something. But not alone. I'm no good without her," he repeated.

In the twilight he couldn't see her face, but her voice, when she replied, was not unsympathetic.

"I'll see," she said, "I'll think."

"No!" he answered, with unusual decision, "Please decide now. I can't wait. I can't stand another night. If you'll lend me five dollars more, I'll go to her to-morrow morning."

"I haven't got it now. I don't get my week's salary until to-morrow."

"And you'll let me have it then?"

"I—oh, yes, I will!" she answered, with a sort of sob.

"You're a brick—Minnie!" he cried, joyfully, and seized her warm little hand. "Sister Minnie! I won't forget this!" And hastened off to send a telegram to Frankie.

"Coming to-morrow.

LIONEL."

Minnie walked home very slowly. In the evenings she always played cards with the old lady from the time when she woke up from her after-dinner nap until eleven. This evening was just as usual. During the nap, which was never mentioned, Minnie sat looking over the morning paper, a decorous and sober little figure; then, when the querulous old voice suggested a game, she rose with

well-paid cheerfulness, brought out the pack and the folding table, played conscientiously and amiably, led the old lady upstairs at the proper time, said "Good-night," fetched her a glass of water, and then was free.

She retired to her own little room, locked the door after her, and stood still in the dark, with clenched hands.

"She shan't have him!" she whispered. "I won't give him up! I won't! I won't!"

Lionel didn't suspect the effect his innocent grey eyes had had upon that heart, never before touched! But *she* had been fully aware, from the first time she had seen him. It was too startling and intense a feeling to be mistaken. She had made up her mind then. He was the one man on earth for her. She had never even fancied herself in love before, and never did again. It was her unique passion.

She didn't deceive herself. She admitted that she intended to get Lionel away from Frankie by hook or by crook. Of course, being Minnie, she felt that it would be for his good and for Frankie's good, and that she was doing it largely for their sakes. She and she alone was the infallible judge of what was best for everyone on earth. She had no misgivings on that score. Her only anxiety lay in her knowledge that Lionel was not at all attracted by her, and that, left to himself, he never would be. She wasn't the sort of woman he liked.

Her original intention, when she had seen ample time ahead, had been to enlist old Mrs. Lounsbury on her side, to make everything very correct, very regular, in contrast to Frankie's wildness. And then, later, to hold out prospects, all sorts of alluring prospects, of assistance from the old lady, of an unassailable "position" in their married life, of respectability and money, which she had seen that he coveted. For, like all women who can

"manage" men, Minnie had an unerring flair for the weak point; that being the pivot upon which they may most easily be swung. She knew what she was doing when she asked Lionel to tea. She had first carefully prepared her aunt with stories, wholly fictitious, of his social standing and eligibility, and his affection for herself. She knew that he would appreciate the atmosphere of money and solidity there, and that it would reflect credit upon herself. The next step, already arranged with her approving aunt, was an invitation to dinner.

But that wouldn't serve now, if he were going to be so impetuous. She would have to work quickly. If he saw Frankie again, or had many more letters from her, all would be lost. A desperate step was necessary, and she took it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I

MINNIE had asked Lionel to stop at home the next day until he heard from her, and of course, he did so, simply darting out, once for breakfast, once for lunch.

He was very nervous for fear he'd miss the afternoon train to Brownsville Landing. Frankie would be expecting him, perhaps she'd meet the trains. He couldn't bear the idea of her waiting disappointed, at the station. After that train at three, there wasn't another until seven; he was sure she couldn't manage that.

And still he was happy and full of hope, of Frankie's fine spirit of adventurousness; he gloried in the rashness of the marriage, felt strong, masterful, able to cope with the world. Poor Lionel! Frail barrier against which the stream of Minnie's life force was to hurl itself! He had but an hour more to remain upright, before he was swept down and submerged and laid flat forever in the mud. An hour more of manhood.

II

Three o'clock had passed, and he knew that day to be lost. It was five o'clock and he had just lighted the gas when there was a knock at his door, and he discovered Minnie herself in the dark hall.

He was surprised and a little shocked; wondered what the landlady would think. Still, of course, he had to ask her in, and in she came, and sat down in his one chair.

He was obliged to sit on the bed, an informality very distressing to him. He didn't like this sort of thing at all; it wasn't correct, it wasn't well-bred.

He waited and waited for her to speak, but she remained silent, pale and rigid. And no wonder, considering what was in her head!

"I've brought it!" she said.

"Thank you!" he said. "It's awfully good of you. We'll never forget it!"

She smiled constrainedly, but said nothing. Her eyes wandered about the mean, shabby room, with the dusty yellowish carpet on the floor, the narrow painted bureau covered with a torn towel, the iron bed with its one flat pillow, his smart little trunk, so out of place there. So intent was she that he fancied she was about to make some comment on the poverty of which he was ashamed. But she only said:

"I do wish I had a cup of tea! I've such a headache!"

"We can go out——"

"Oh, couldn't we have it here? Isn't that a spirit lamp?"

"Yes," he answered, reluctantly, "but I've no milk or sugar——"

"I'm sure you can get them very near here."

He could think of no polite reason for refusing, so he went out to buy what she told him, slipping in and out of the front door, in mortal terror lest the landlady should catch him and tell him ladies weren't allowed in the gentlemen's rooms. Why did Minnie do such an extraordinary, unnecessary thing?

When he got back, the spirit lamp was lighted and the little kettle beginning to hiss, while Minnie sat watching it. She looked very much at home. She had taken off her jacket and hat, and he fancied that her hair was

better dressed than usual, that she was wearing a rather gayer blouse, in short, that she was "dressed up."

"Now then!" she said, cheerfully, "aren't we cozy?"

"Rather!" he answered, gallantly, and might have added, "*Too* cozy!"

He was like the innocent young heroine in a drama; he had a dim perception of something evil, he felt that he ought not to be there alone with Minnie.

The tea seemed to do her good, for she revived, and became quite animated, talked to him about Frances, their childhood, their schooldays, anything and everything. The friendly, disarming air, the classic second step of the seducer! He was amused by her chatter, but he didn't lose his feeling of uneasiness. Because, in spite of her immeasurably respectable appearance——

The clock struck seven and he felt obliged to protest.

"I say!" he cried, in pretended surprise, "seven o'clock! Shan't we go out and—take a walk—have a bit of supper somewhere?"

"Oh, no," said Minnie, "I'll have to be going."

She rose and picked up her hat. But did not put it on; at last put it down again and opened her worn little pocketbook.

"Here is the money, Mr. Naylor," she said, and held out a bill to him.

Then, as he took it, suddenly she flung herself into the chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh!" she sobbed, "Oh! It's *too* hard!"

He was frightened and disconcerted. He knew women were liable to such curious attacks, but he had never before witnessed one. It made him so sorry for her weakness and inferiority. Poor little thing! Poor emotional, unbalanced Woman!

"I say!" he said, "What is it? Please don't cry!"

The huddled little figure didn't reply, kept on weeping in a muffled sort of way.

"Please tell me!" he entreated. He went so far as to pat her shoulder, while he cast about for something to say or to do.

"Is it on account of Frankie?" he asked.

She raised a miserable, tear-stained face and looked straight at him.

"No!" she cried. "I—I *thought* I was able—to give you up—but oh, I can't!"

"Give me up!" exclaimed the astonished Lionel.

Her great black eyes, their long lashes wet and heavy with tears, were fixed upon his face with solemn intensity.

"Yes!" she said, firmly.

"But—exactly what——?" he stammered.

"I don't care if you do know it," she said.

He began to understand; he turned scarlet, he dared not look at her, and yet couldn't take his eyes from her dark, desperate little face.

Suddenly she stretched up her arms to him, like a child.

"Oh, Lionel!" she cried, in such a pitiful voice that he couldn't withstand her. She clung to him, sobbing, trembling, her head buried in his coat.

"Oh, Lionel, I love you so!"

He was immeasurably moved. He put an arm about her and very gently stroked her hair.

"Don't cry!" he said. "Poor little girl! Don't cry!"

To save his life he couldn't have kept the least little trace of condescension out of his tone. He had never been made love to before; he felt that he hadn't quite realised his own charm. He felt very, very kindly toward poor Minnie, unhappy victim to his fascination. An absolutely hopeless passion; she had to be made to

see that, in the most humane way possible. He kept on patting her shoulder.

"Lionel!" she said, looking up again with those really magnificent dark eyes, "Please—you won't despise me, will you? I can't—can't help it! I never—in all my life——!"

"Of course I don't despise you! I think you're a—I think you're—a fine woman," he said, ineptly. "Come now! Don't cry, my dear girl! You'll make yourself ill, you know."

As gently as possible he disengaged her clinging arms and made her sit down in the chair again, then he dipped a towel in cold water and wiped her swollen eyes. He had not as yet had time to realise the awkwardness of this affair; he was, to tell the truth, just a little elated. Supermanly.

He talked to her soothingly until she had stopped crying, then:

"It's getting late," he said, "we'd really better be——"

She jumped up again, so violently that her dishevelled hair came down and fell over her shoulders. She seized him by the wrist.

"I won't go!" she cried.

And caught him round the neck and strained him to her, kissing him wildly.

But why try to tell of all that—the eternal wiles of a passionate woman? He had no weapon against her. He had his love for Frankie, but *this* was not love. He had his ideas of honour, he was fastidious, he was, after a fashion, somewhat austere. But his safety, and the safety of all his sex—lay only in avoiding the irresistible. And of all the allurements in the world, there is none to compare with the abandon of the respectable woman.

Poor devil! Poor devil!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I

HORACE was in his private office, not at all busy, when his brother came in. He might, if he had been a child of nature, have jumped up and cried out that the light of his life had returned, but instead he made a decent effort to conceal his delight.

"Well!" he said, questioningly.

"Well!" said Lionel, with just his old smile.

Horace melted.

"So you've thought better of it, eh? Find you haven't many friends who'll do for you what——"

"The usual thing," said Lionel, with a luxurious feeling of sinking down on a feather bed, of completely throwing himself upon someone else. "I'm in a mess, and I want your help."

This pleased Horace beyond measure.

"Debts?" he asked, trying to frown.

"No—not entirely. . . . Fact is, old boy, I'm married!"

"By Jove! And that independent young lady's willing to come round now, is she? Wouldn't let you take anything from me, I remember. What is it now? Baby?"

"Presently. But, I say, Horace, it's not *that* one."

"Good God!" cried Horace, in amazement. "Another one!"

"Her sister. . . . I—er—it's hard to explain. . . ."

"She was a pretty girl," said Horace, "I thought she'd suit you very well."

Lionel's face had become very red. It was undoubtedly difficult to explain, and yet he wanted terribly to tell it all to someone, to hear another person's comment, to be told definitely whether he was a natural man or a cad. Honestly he didn't know. There were some incidents that absolutely couldn't be mentioned. And yet, if they were omitted, the story would be unintelligible.

"I'll have to—you'll have to assure me—give me your word you'll never mention this—— Especially to Julie. I'm only telling you because I want you to—understand the whole thing . . ."

He was very anxious, above all, to remove any impression that he was fickle, unstable.

"You see," he began, "I—Frances and I were separated. More or less by her sister. That is, her sister thought it wasn't a good match for Frankie, so she prevented it. She explained it all to me, perfectly frankly. She knows Frankie so well, you see. Knew she couldn't be happy with me. So she . . . explained it all. Of course, I had to see her several times, to talk it over, and so forth. And—I—really, this is hard to tell, you know, without seeming—— She—the sister—took a sort of fancy to me. I didn't—hadn't any idea of such a thing. . . . I asked her to lend me some money so that I could go out to see Frankie—and—she brought it over to me, in my room. . . ."

"Why?" enquired Horace, "What made her come to your room?"

"Well—more or less, to talk about Frankie. . . . And—in fact, she . . . gave herself away, you know. . . . I really can't explain very well, old boy, but—I rather lost my head . . . and—she stayed."

"Phew!" said Horace.

"So," said Lionel, and grew very red again, "Well, in fact—what else could I do? We took a furnished flat

—and we weren't going to say anything about it for a bit —and then this baby—— So we were married yesterday.”

Horace was looking unusually grave. There were things about this affair he didn't like.

“You're sure it wasn't a trap? It looks mighty queer, my boy.”

Lionel laughed.

“I wish you knew Minnie,” he said. “Then you'd never think such a thing. She's the most naïve, simple little soul——”

“But she should not have stopped there with you. She must have known she was forcing you into a marriage. My boy. . . . It's a bad business. How old is she?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Old enough to understand all that. My boy, I know you fairly well. I'd take an oath,” he said solemnly, “that you wouldn't ‘lose your head,’ as you put it, and take advantage of a respectable young woman unless you were given encouragement—an extraordinary amount of encouragement. Am I right?”

Lionel was not able to be properly indignant.

“I'll admit,” he said, still very red, “that she's—too fond of me. Too much faith in me. . . . But, Horace, old man, you mustn't misunderstand her. She's the best little woman on earth. Absolutely. An angel. Never complains. Never finds fault. There she is, all day long, shut up in that beastly little flat, while I'm hunting a job. No clothes, no amusements. Especially hard on her now.”

He was rather surprised at the look he saw on his brother's face, a compassion so deep, so comprehending.

For Horace was quite certain that Lionel had been trapped, had been the dupe of a woman, whether loving or scheming, it mattered little. Perhaps she could be

bought off—a divorce arranged, or something of that sort.

“Well, old chap!” he said, “What can I do for you? How can I help you?”

“That’s what I came to see you about. Fact is, Minnie’s longing to be in the country. Doctor says it would do her no end of good. I thought perhaps you’d finance a little house, lend me a bit, you know, or take a mortgage, or whatever it is they do.”

Horace agreed at once. Lionel proceeded to the next point.

“And I wish you’d come home with me and *see* Minnie,” he said, “I’d like you to talk it over with her. She has very practical ideas. Can you manage it?”

Horace looked at his watch and said he could. There was nothing he wanted more at that moment than to see Minnie. He believed that after even the briefest interview, he would know how she was to be got rid of, and Lionel saved. He had gained an impression of her as a dangerous and unscrupulous woman, who could do Lionel nothing but harm.

An impression never effaced, although she was quite a different sort of person from the adventuress he had pictured. He sat talking to her for an hour or more, asking friendly questions. Minnie herself fancied that her domesticity, her womanliness were pleasing him, that he was reflecting upon the good Lionel would derive from this match. Whereas! He was, after all, the same Horace who had chosen for his wife a flamboyant and radiant beauty, the Horace who had for years been more than tolerant of his wastrel brother’s follies and caprices. He was a man with a fanatic love for charm and distinction and beauty, there could have been no one to whom Minnie’s sober dowdiness would have made less appeal. His pity for Lionel increased every minute,

and he felt for Minnie something as near hatred as his kindly nature allowed.

He said he was going to walk home, and Lionel offered to accompany him part of the way.

"What do you think of her now?" he asked, anxiously, as they came out into the dusky street.

"A very nice little woman," Horace answered. He could not force himself to say more. Pain and disappointment seized him by the throat. Lionel in that dingy flat, with that sallow, complacent woman who talked about growing vegetables in the suburbs. The sort of woman inevitably to grow fat. Shifty, too. Horace had had his experiences with women, there was a quality in this one not at all unknown to him.

Lionel too fell silent. He was wondering just what *he* thought himself. He went back to the beginning; he was able to remember everything, every detail, and still it wasn't clear—

II

It wasn't clear how he, the lover of Frankie, could have so conducted himself with Minnie. And why he felt so little remorse or shame or even regret?

He fancied that it must be because he loved Minnie. In spite of thirty years in the world, he was still so sentimental, so ignorant, that he had no comprehension of the base and sensual passion which had overwhelmed him. Minnie was his wife; a fellow couldn't feel that way toward his wife. He was obliged to call it love. He couldn't imagine that Minnie, so serious and sensible, Minnie who didn't even take much interest in how she dressed her hair, could be just as carnal, as gross, as any scarlet woman. He couldn't see, in all her endless plans for his "comfort," the hidden snare, the net that bound him closer. She thought of his food, his tobacco, that his bed should be comfortable, his linen mended.

This ignorant and unbeautiful Circe was not content with his metamorphosis; the wretched swine must be taught to be more swinish.

He thought he was happy. She was very loving, very cheerful, inordinately devoted. There was a sort of joy in coming back to a home of his own after a day's futile search for something to do, no matter if the home were a furnished flat daily growing dirtier and dustier. He enjoyed the bright welcome and her soothing interest in his adventures. She always agreed with him, always approved of what he did.

Her condition touched him, too. He felt that she had given up everything for him, had sacrificed herself with a splendid ardour. He believed that he should, and did, admire all this, that there was something noble in that greedy violence, that reckless seizure of what she desired.

She had been aware of the great advantage she had obtained from not being married. It made her more pathetic, more helpless. He had suggested it more than once, but she only cried and said she was ashamed.

"I know you despise me," she insisted.

"But, dearest, I don't! I *honour* you!" he always answered.

At last she tearfully confided her "secret" to him, and agreed to be married at once. She pretended to be glad, but she wasn't. She hadn't enough imagination to love an unseen child, and she certainly had no desire for one as a matter of principle. No more than an animal. And, like an animal, she was sure to love it when it came. Except for the fact that it gave her a hold on Lionel, she looked upon the whole affair as a bother and an expense. His delight seemed to her more or less absurd.

He really was delighted; really happy for the time being. He was lost in an utter and gross satisfaction.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I

JULIE consented to go out with Horace one Sunday to see the young couple, although she was something more than reluctant. She was conscious of being an irreproachable woman and wife, so that when she wanted Lionel for herself, it was in a perfectly respectable way. She really *needed* him. Horace was forty, stout, and what this daughter of a "Cattle King" amazingly called "bourgeois." As a husband he had advantages, such as money and complaisance and inferiority, but as a playmate, he wouldn't do at all. Lionel was required for sweetness and light. She had always enjoyed quarrelling with him. She had liked to humiliate him, because she had secretly looked upon him as a superior being. She was disgusted with him for marrying.

She sat back in the limousine and talked petulantly about it to Horace. She had, of course, made the best of herself, looked her very loveliest, to make Lionel discontented and his wife miserable if possible. She was in white, a white serge frock and a small white toque from which floated a long wine-red veil. It gave her a sort of Oriental look, with her dark skin and immense, brilliant eyes. She knew Lionel would appreciate the effect.

"What's the creature like?" she asked.

"Not pretty," said Horace. "Dowdy, quiet little thing."

"But *why*? I can't understand it. There's something

damn queer about it, Horace. He was crazy about that other girl, and at least she was good-looking. How did this one get hold of him? Of course he's an awful fool; anyone could make a monkey of him, but still—a dowdy woman! That is a mystery! And right after his being engaged to that other one!"

"He seems very happy," said Horace. He was determined to make the best of this business.

"Lord!" cried Julie, "They don't live *here*!"

The motor had stopped before a very small house of unstained shingles, an unfinished looking little house, standing in a row of similar houses in a quite select residential park of the cheaper sort. One knows what that implies; the sun-baked street lined with stripling trees that give no shade; not a fence, not a hedge, every porch occupied and public as the sidewalk, the children in white Sunday shoes, everything glaring, immeasurably common, and cheap, sweltering in the July sun.

"Does he really live in this hole?" she asked.

"They haven't much money," said Horace, apologetically.

"Then give them some, for Heaven's sake, and get that poor boy away from here!"

She jumped out, aware that everyone on every porch was watching her, walked along the tiny path and up the front steps. Minnie at once opened the door, and behind her stood Lionel.

Minnie, outwardly polite and modest, was absorbed in her inspection of Julie; she didn't know what she was saying, or hear a word that was said to her for a few moments. She formed an instantaneous opinion of her, judged her "fast" and "vulgar," and led her into the little sitting-room. She knew this was going to be a grave encounter; she saw that domestic virtues would have little significance in those eyes.

"Would you like to come upstairs to take off your hat?" asked Minnie.

"No thanks," she answered, carelessly, without turning her head. "Li, you've got awfully thin. Don't you eat enough? Have you got a good cook?"

"I'm the cook," said Minnie, with her wide, bright smile, "I hope I'm a good one."

"Rather!" cried Lionel. "She's a wonder, Julie."

"Is she?" said Julie. "That's nice. I've never met a cook before."

Now that was warning enough; it was a challenge and not a subtle one either. But no one ventured to pick up her gage; certainly not Horace or Lionel, they were terrified. Not Minnie; she was very wary of such an adversary.

Julie's careless glance swept the sober little figure from head to foot.

"Let's see your doll's house, Li," she said. "It's the smallest thing I've ever seen."

He got up, reluctantly. She really was a bit too—too obvious. He thought perhaps he'd speak to her, tactfully. And yet it was so good to see her, and her beauty and vividness, a breath from a vanished life. He couldn't help a feeling of kinship with her, which was not loyal to Minnie. He saw so plainly how the house must look to her, and how Minnie appeared. Understood what she was thinking.

He led her into the dining-room, furnished with a proper little "set" of light oak, the stupidest sort of room, neither pretty nor comfortable. He opened and hastily closed the door of the kitchen, which was evidently not prepared for inspection; then he took her upstairs to see three small bedrooms, with cheap white iron beds.

She stopped him in the doorway of the last of these

distressing rooms and put her hands on his shoulders, looking into his face with her wonderful eyes.

"Oh, you fool of a boy!" she said, "How could you! How long do you think you're going to stand this!"

"Julie," he assured her, solemnly, "I've never been so happy before in my life."

It was true. In this ugly little place, in the midst of increasing and pressing worry over money, he had been content. He had believed that he had returned to something simpler and better than his old life. He didn't recognise it as a degradation. That is indeed the Minnie method. She had drugged him, stupefied him with a sort of low comfort. Only now, with Julie beside him, did doubts begin to arise.

Julie stared at him.

"I don't believe it," she said, bluntly, "You're not going to pretend you're fond of that awful dowdy little——"

"I say, Julie! You're——"

"Be honest, then. I'm awfully sorry for you. Can't you get a divorce or something?"

"I'm not joking, Julie. She's my wife, and I—really I can't tell you what I think of her——"

"I'll tell you what *I* think of her. She's a nasty, sneaky, hypocritical devil. I could see it at once. She's——" Julie cast about for an expression, "She's like a bad nun."

"Stop it, Julie! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Rot! *You* ought to be ashamed of yourself, to be tricked by such a cheap little humbug."

They were interrupted by Horace coming upstairs in profound distress.

"Hush!" he whispered, "You can be heard!"

"What the devil do I care?" demanded Julie.

"Can't you behave like a lady?" he asked, still in a whisper.

Her famous temper began to heat.

"A lady!" she cried, "You wouldn't know a lady if you saw one, any of you. A fine lot! A fat old money-grubber like you, and a grafter like Lionel, and that slut downstairs! I certainly must be on my best behaviour here."

The manners acquired in the city had dropped away, revealing the older, truer self, the violent and reckless daughter of the "Cattle King," the spoiled princess of a primitive community. She had plenty to say, she put her hands on her slim hips and attacked them all with vigour, thoroughly enjoying herself. She wanted to score off Minnie, and she did. And Minnie had to pretend not to hear. This was the sort of woman she couldn't cope with, a woman she feared.

Horace tried to remonstrate.

"Shut up, Horace," she said, briskly, "The creature's a ———. Can't you see the condition she's in, and they haven't been married a month?"

That silenced everyone.

"Now," she said, at last, "I'm going. Come on, Horace!"

"Not till you apologise to Lionel's wife," he said, weakly.

"Oh, give her a cheque," said Julie, "that's the kind of apology *she* wants. Come on!"

She went out of the house like a whirlwind, with her long veil floating behind her, and sprang into the car to wait for her husband, looking about at the citizens rocking on their porches with her brilliant, insolent eyes.

"Oh, come on!" she called out to Horace, who was lingering in an effort to propitiate his hosts. "Let's get out of this damned hole!"

She startled and shocked the entire select neighbourhood, as she had intended. And produced the desired effect of bringing Horace out at once. They spun away, driven by a chauffeur who couldn't keep a grin from his face, leaving behind them astonishment, wrath and excitement.

II

It was quite natural that Minnie should cry. Lionel admired her for not crying much more. She dried her eyes, smiled ruefully, and got up.

"I must get your dinner ready, darling," she said.

"No hurry. Rest a bit, you poor girl! By Jove! That was a beastly scene! No wonder you're upset."

"I'm not upset now," she said, quietly. "A person like that couldn't affect me very much."

And with a splendid Defoe grandeur, she went about her work.

As had her grandmother and Frankie, so did Lionel admire her housekeeping. Because she was always busy and always wearing an apron, he believed that she must accomplish an incredible amount of work. There was a great deal of dust about, the meals were always late and often burned, but that all went to prove what a lot there was to be done. She was so hurried, so anxious, always thinking of his comfort.

And nothing but his comfort. Never of his soul, his spirit. She got the dinner on the table and sat down opposite, watching with a frown to see that he ate enough. She still wore her apron, and her hair was very untidy, but he was used to that now. Anyway he felt that he must never look upon Minnie with physical eyes, he was to treasure her only for her sublime moral worth, her self-sacrifice, her stern sense of duty, her noble womanhood.

"Eat the pudding, dear," she urged, "It's all made of milk. It will do you good."

He smiled at her and obeyed.

After dinner she made him sit in his comfortable chair on the porch with a cigar, while she washed the dishes. She would never let him help her. Pale and exhausted, doing everything in the most irrational way, it was quite nine o'clock before she could join him.

At last she came out on the porch and sat down near him, creaking back and forth in her particular rocking-chair. Out of the darkness her voice came suddenly and amazingly.

"I suppose we'll have to patch it up."

"What?" he asked, puzzled, thinking of possible leaks in roof or ceiling.

"This quarrel. With your sister-in-law."

"I shouldn't call it a 'quarrel,'" he said. "She insulted you, grossly. I don't see how or why it should be 'patched up.'"

"I'm willing to overlook it," said Minnie. "Anyway, what does it matter what such a woman says? It won't do for you to quarrel with your brother."

"I don't intend to. We'll simply let the thing drop. But of course Julie can't come here again, and we won't enter her house."

"It isn't her house; it's your brother's——"

"I say! What are you driving at, Minnie? Haven't you any pride?"

She began to cry.

"We'll need a great deal of help from Horace," she said, "and she's quite capable of turning him against us. This baby's going to be a terrible expense."

He rebelled rather vigorously at first, but of course, in the end, succumbed. Minnie's sole view of the expected baby as an anxiety and a crushing responsibility

had begun to infect him. He too commenced to see it only as an expense that must be met—and met by Horace. She reiterated ceaselessly that it was their “duty” to this child to humiliate themselves, sacrifice all pride and independence. A curious doctrine, that the parents exist only to sustain their offspring, forever deprived of any original existence, any private aims, living only to convey physical nourishment.

III

The day came, the terrible expense began, and Minnie’s child entered the world. It must be admitted that Minnie behaved very badly. She was never good at enduring pain, and she was moreover in terror of dying. Altogether a bad time, for her, for the doctor, for the nurse, and for poor Lionel.

But once the child was born, her fierce maternal passion flamed into life. She would have died to defend her baby. She nearly destroyed it with indulgence. That was her manner of loving.

And she believed that the fact of having this child constituted a claim upon all the world. That whatever she did for its sake was fully justified. Because she loved it, she was licensed to take what she could for it, by any and all means to secure advantages for it. A sort of divine license given only to mothers, so that they could do no wrong; an unlimited indulgence. Be assured that she took advantage of it!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I

THEY went on, God knows how, for two years. Always in debt, always harassed, gradually going down and down, their style of living always deteriorating, themselves becoming more indifferent, more slovenly.

They ate their meals in the kitchen, horrible meals of fried chopped meat and eternal potatoes. The little child was pallid and under-nourished, they bought milk for her dutifully, but Minnie had perverted her appetite with sweets and all sorts of rubbish, and she refused to drink it, unless it were made 'tasty' with coffee or tea. Minnie even did the family washing, with incredible labour and pitiful results: Lionel went about dressed in greyish shirts and streaked soft collars. At first he suffered, but very soon he forgot to notice.

Horace helped them generously, without question. But under Minnie's influence, Lionel learned to feel no gratitude, even to feel resentful. For some reason the childless Horace was held morally responsible for their child. He didn't do enough, in fact, he *couldn't* have done enough; the most fantastic sacrifice would not have sufficed. Lionel rarely went to see him, and when he did, was constrained and formal. He communicated with him by means of letters very unpleasant to receive. He was no longer a friend or a brother, he was—metaphors fail for his sex—he was the male equivalent of a milch cow, of the goose that laid the golden egg. No one realised how the poor fellow suffered from this exploitation.

Lionel was a ruined man, his health impaired by Minnie's loving cooking, his soul debauched by her dogma. He had never been resolute or original; his strength had lain in his conventionality, his acceptance of the principles taught him by others. And this faith in his tradition Minnie had stifled, to fell him with her own horrible doctrine of expediency.

He tried to work. Horace offered to keep him on in his office, but it didn't do. They quarrelled; Lionel, instigated by Minnie, said he wasn't being paid enough, and didn't have a position of sufficient importance. Horace was very much a business man; he was willing to give, even to be bled, but business was sacred; he couldn't put Lionel in a responsible place.

He got him another job, but Lionel couldn't keep it. He was very slow to learn, and very poor at figures. He wasn't exactly stupid, but when he tried to hurry, he grew dazed and helpless. He was untrained and idiotically educated. He couldn't compete with the men—even the girls—about him, with their wits sharpened by struggle and poverty, their shallow minds trained to run smoothly and rapidly in one groove.

Next he tried to sell automobiles. He saw a splendid future in this, and so did Minnie. But after he had called on one or two "prospects," his enthusiasm vanished. The average American was exasperated by his slowness, his quite unconscious air of superiority, by his English accent. He was treated very rudely and he couldn't stand that.

Then, on the strength of his distinguished appearance, and the English accent, he got a place as clerk in a very select book shop of Fifth Avenue. He liked that, and the customers liked him. They were "society people"; they appreciated his air, and he was well-disposed toward them. He was a cheerful, sweet-tempered fel-

low, willing to take any amount of trouble. But he knew nothing at all of books, and he *could* not learn the stock, couldn't remember which books to push, or the names of former books by popular authors. And when he was asked, as he very frequently was, if he couldn't recommend something "really good," he had always to hurry and ask one of the clerks who could remember. After several months he was discharged.

If it hadn't been for Horace, he would have been entirely discouraged. But so long as there was Horace to find him jobs and to support him during the intervals, he kept up his courage. There was the possibility of something delightful just round the corner. He rather enjoyed working, and trying new things. And it didn't matter so very much if he *did* fail. There was always another chance to be had.

II

It was a very hot day in August, and Lionel found the trip from the city to his home suburb far from agreeable. He was in one of his moods for despising everything in his adopted country, a mood familiar to every alien in every country under the sun. He hated the way the people made themselves comfortable on the train, men with handkerchiefs in their collars and women in what he savagely called "ball dresses." Personally he accepted hot weather in the proper British spirit, as one of the afflictions of the country, and he scorned to notice it by any extreme change of costume or of habit. He sat by an open window, but he kept his hat on, and his coat, and maintained at least a cool expression.

Three years of trouble had changed his appearance very little. He was as slim, as elegant, as supercilious as ever, in spite of increasing shabbiness. He had come

from an interview with a corset manufacturer who had advertised for salesmen, and who had instantaneously and violently rejected Lionel. He really couldn't find anything to do. He wanted to work, and to succeed, but it was a bit too hard. What advantages he had were unmarketable. He was bored with sitting about at home, and he wanted very much to be independent of Horace and free from debt and worry, and he wanted new clothes. Poverty was beginning to disagree with him acutely.

"No use!" he said gloomily, as he came up the steps and sat down on the tiny front porch where Minnie was sewing, and keeping an eye on their child, digging in the sunny gutter. "What about a cup of tea?"

Then he noticed that she looked "queer."

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Heat too much for you, old girl?"

"No," she said, and was silent for a moment. Then: "telegram from . . . I'm so sorry. . . . poor Horace is dead."

He had an odd feeling of deliberately putting off his grief until a more fitting time. He discussed the thing with Minnie as if it concerned a stranger. Apoplexy. Not to be wondered at. The funeral was to be on Thursday.

"I don't suppose Julie will be heart-broken," said Minnie. "She'll be very well off, won't she, Lionel?"

He was aware that she longed to discuss his own prospects; how "well off" he was to be, but he refused to open the subject. It wasn't decent. No doubt Horace had done the proper thing.

That evening, after the child was in bed and Minnie in the kitchen washing the dishes, he went out on the porch with his pipe and consecrated an hour to Horace. Recalled his unfailing kindness, his justice, his melan-

choly, saw, for an instant, and in a vague way, the tragedy of the man who is only a means of supplying others with money. Childless, friendless, the most exploited creature under the sun.

He knew what a loss he had suffered! And still had that wretched feeling that the real pain was coming later, that now only his brain knew it, not yet his heart.

He had a sudden vision of that tea with Horace and Frankie, something more vivid than a memory. It brought an awful, blinding realisation of his present solitude. His two friends gone, and he left alone with a stranger. Minnie *was* a stranger. He couldn't talk to her about Horace.

"Poor old man!" he said, with a sigh for that kindly lost spirit.

III

Minnie was aware of something hostile in her husband's attitude, and, with a very great effort, kept her opinions to herself.

The hot weather held, and it wore her out. The child couldn't sleep at night. Her difficulties grew mountainous, outrageous. Horace's assistance had stopped and they heard nothing about his will. At last she was forced to attack.

"Lionel," she said, "I haven't a penny. You'll have to do something."

He was silent.

"You know what those lawyers are," she went on, "you have to keep after them. They *expect* it."

But Lionel flatly refused even to make enquiries about the will. He would not run greedily after old Horace's money.

"It's not decent," he said, stiffly.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Minnie. "Do *think* a little, instead of using those silly stock phrases. There's the poor baby. She needs clothes dreadfully. You shouldn't let your pride stand in the way. . . ."

"They'll let us know at the proper time. Until they do, we can scrape along——"

"We can't! I've bills everywhere. People are getting nasty. It's dreadfully humiliating for me."

"Sorry, but there's nothing to be done," he repeated, frigidly.

"There is! You could just ask his lawyers to let you see the will——"

"My dear girl, I am not going to go crawling after Horace's money. It's not decent. I absolutely will not!"

He might have known what would happen after that, but he didn't even suspect. . . .

Minnie said she was obliged to go to the city, shopping. And as she never concerned herself except about domestic matters, Lionel believed her object to be entirely serious and legitimate, and agreed to stop at home with the baby while she was gone. He had forgotten she had said she had no money, and anyway, he had learned that that statement from Minnie was not to be believed. She always said that.

It was a horrible day for him. He didn't know what to do with himself. He sat on the sun scorched little porch conscientiously watching his languid child digging in the gutter. It seemed to him to spend all its waking hours there, busy with some patient work. At noon he brought her in and fed her with the lunch Minnie had left, then he rocked her to sleep in a hammock on the sweltering porch.

He wandered about the hot, dirty little house, smoking and trying not to think. He did not dare to reflect, he

did not wish to face the secret desolation in his soul. He valiantly maintained that his life here with Minnie was "wholesome," was "normal," was really the best sort of life. And tried to deny visions of cool seaside hotels, or bars where men lounged in flannels and drank those amazing and adorable American drinks, with ice clinking in them. . . . He almost saw himself on the veranda of a country club, with other well-dressed people, gay, careless, enviable.

He strode across the tiny dining room to disperse a swarm of flies about an uncovered sugar bowl, and jerked down the dark shades, as much to hide the room from his own eyes as to quiet the disgusting insects. She *would* leave the cloth on the table all day long, with its crumbs and grease spots.

The baby called him; he went out and took her out of the hammock, poor hot, patient little soul! He washed her pale little face, disfigured with mosquito bites, and carried her out on the porch again. He held her in his lap; she didn't want to stir, lay against him, staring before her.

Toward five o'clock Minnie came home, pallid and limp from the heat, with her black hair escaping in wisps from under her crushed little hat.

"She looks like a char-woman," he reflected, as he watched her coming.

She flung herself into a chair.

"Oh, *Lionel!*" she said, "*what* do you think!"

He asked "What?" without much interest, expecting to hear that cotton stockings were so much dearer, or some other Minnie news. She pulled a bulky paper out of her hand bag.

"Horace's will!" she said, "and he hasn't left you a penny. The lawyer told me this is a new one, made only a month ago. And that he'd been arranging a trust fund

or something of the sort for you—something all tied up, so you could only touch the interest—and then, before he'd signed anything, he died. Oh, Lionel! Not a penny!"

IV

Then, too, he might have foreseen and prevented her next step, but again he failed to do so, because it was a bit beyond his imagination. She wrote a terrific letter to Julie, telling her she was defrauding Lionel of his rights, that she knew Horace's intentions, and ought, if she had *any* feeling of honour, to carry them out.

Julie replied briefly:

"You won't get a red cent out of me, now or any other time. I'm sorry for Lionel, but he has got to lie in the bed he's made."

Lionel didn't even reproach Minnie for having written. What was the use? His humiliation couldn't be hidden from any one.

They had a serious situation to confront. They were in debt, and they had an income on which they couldn't exist. And Minnie, although she bought the cheapest and nastiest of everything, and never spent a penny on anything gracious or luxurious, had not the gift of stretching a dollar. Her economy was all negative. She never thought, "What is the best I can get with my money?" but always, "How little can I spend?" She had no idea of values, of proportion.

The poor thing worried unceasingly, because it was her duty to do so; lay awake at night by the side of her magnificent and superior husband and planned with desperation. During the day she was cheerful, that also being her duty, and tried as she always had tried, to make Lionel comfortable. She really loved and admired him more than he ever realised. She considered him

finer than herself; she wanted to spare him, to please him, to keep him contented and happy at any cost to herself.

He, for his part, was past any worry. He simply existed from day to day like a caged animal, absolutely without hope, fortitude his only virtue. He endured, she struggled.

In the course of time she evolved a plan.

She came out on the porch after she had finished her laborious work in the kitchen, and sat down at the top of the steps, near Lionel's feet. From either side came the nasal voices of their neighbours, silly laughs, and the whining cries of tired children. Little Sandra lay asleep in the hammock nearby. There was an arc light almost opposite; it shone on Minnie's earnest face and Lionel's unpolished boots.

"It's *very* hot, isn't it?" she said, rather pitifully.

"Very," he agreed.

There was a long silence.

"Lionel!"

Minnie's voice came out of the dark, fatigued and insistent.

"I've been thinking—it's such a shame for you to be wasted this way. . . . I saw an advertisement and I wrote to it. . . . I think it would be just the thing for you. Gentlemanly, and yet you could make any amount of money."

"What is it?" he asked, without much interest.

"Here's the booklet." She began to read in a solemn voice, "*Be your own master! Read what others have done! The Manhattan Institute of Tonico-Therapy. Ten weeks course renders you independent for life. Highly paid selected staff instructs in all branches.*" And it goes on to tell you the theory of it. How all illnesses come from the chemical action of poisons in the stom-

ach. You learn the antidotes for all these poisons, and then how to find which poison is causing the trouble, and there you are! I think—it sounds wonderful.”

“What rot! The ordinary fake!” said Lionel impatiently.

“And you should read the money the doctors make!”

“It’s a swindle, I tell you! There are any number of them. The rankest sort of fraud.”

Then Minnie showed the cloven hoof.

“What if it is?” she asked, “we’ve got to live. It wouldn’t do any one any harm. I dare say in lots of cases it’s very good——”

“I don’t intend to be a swindler,” he interrupted, “it’s no use talking any more about it. I’m surprised you could consider a thing like that.”

“Very well, then, think of something better.”

“I couldn’t think of anything much worse.”

“You could do it for a little while, and save up——”

He jumped up.

“No!” he cried, angrily. “It’s outrageous! Don’t mention it again! There are some things I will *not* do!”

But there weren’t!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I

It was the tragedy of Lionel's life that he so genuinely admired what was honourable, and so persistently did what was dishonourable. From good and admirable motives always. He was really unselfish; he considered the interests of Minnie and Sandra first and foremost, and tried, in his imbecile way, to further them.

So that Minnie was able, in the course of time, to make him a student of Tonico-Therapy. He had to mortgage his little income for years to come in order to pay his tuition fees and to keep them all alive while he was preparing. He loathed himself for it, but he couldn't see any other course open to him.

He went to the Manhattan Institute one morning. It was on the fifteenth floor of an office building on upper Broadway, a building of dubious repute. He opened a door which was marked "Office," and was brightly greeted by a pretty young woman. He said he had come only for information.

"You'd like to see our place," she said. "I'll call one of the doctors."

She pressed a button, and presently in came a man whom she addressed as Doctor Peters. He was preposterously like a doctor, too, tall, grave, black-bearded, with a quite charming manner. He willingly led Lionel about, through the four rooms which constituted the "Institute." There was the "laboratory" where one learned to compound the "antidotes"; there were two class rooms,

on the walls of which were blackboards and charts, and there was a snug little carpeted room which was the "office of the Dean and Examining Room." There were pamphlets from which the pupils studied, but they were not to be removed from the premises. Upon completing the course, the student was given the "Twenty Famous Key-Prescriptions," by means of which every ill could be remedied.

Poor Lionel was impressed. He stealthily scrutinised the students already engaged in the course; they were well-dressed, quiet fellows, six in all. Doctor Peters gave him information regarding them. Two of them had been hospital nurses, one was a qualified M. D., one a dentist, the other two former "business men." "A good class of men," the doctor said, "we don't encourage any others."

It was all so neat, so bright, so open to inspection. And Doctor Peters had nothing of the charlatan in looks or manners. He was courteous and very restrained; he did not in any way extol the facilities of the Institute to Lionel; he treated him as an intelligent layman anxious to be informed. If he wished to avail himself of these extraordinary advantages, very well. He could see for himself what was offered.

There was in Lionel's mind nothing inquisitive, nothing critical. His rules of conduct had been supplied to him by persons of authority—persons not unlike Doctor Peters. He began to feel that there might be something in this thing, after all.

II

And he never quite lost that idea. Indeed, he developed a faith in Tonico-Therapy which no one—not even Minnie or Doctor Peters, suspected. He studied the course diligently, trying his utmost to understand and

assimilate the farrago of nonsense in the pamphlets. He was too ignorant of physiology and chemistry to detect some of the grossest blunders, and he really fancied he was mastering a sort of profession.

At the end of the ten weeks he received a diploma and a great deal of congratulation and good advice from the "Dean," a white-haired old reprobate with a perpetual grin; and went home to Minnie, a full-fledged "Professor of Tonico-Therapy." The "Dean" had suggested that he use "Professor" instead of "Doctor."

Minnie was wild with delight; she considered their fortune made. She had had a sign printed for him "*Lionel Naylor—Professor of Tonico-Therapy*," and it was displayed prominently in the sitting room window. She also insisted upon an advertisement in one of the local papers, an advertisement modelled upon others she had read and no doubt admired, and which shocked Lionel, yet to which he could offer no reasonable objection. "*If doctors have not helped you,*" it ran, "*why not try the Newer Way—Tonico-Therapy? Professor Lionel Naylor will see clients between 10 and 12 and between 3 and 5. Also by appointment.*"

It would be difficult to find words for Lionel's terror and distress. He showed nothing of it, except that he was quite unable to eat, but he sat, professionally concealed within the house, sick with dread at the idea of a patient's coming. Minnie had arranged the room to look as office-like as she could; she had put a big table in the centre of it, with a big chair for the professor and other chairs ranged about the walls; there was a book-case containing second-hand medical books—imposing though not at all consistent with the theory Lionel was to maintain; even books on surgery, which was so bitterly denounced in the Tonico-Therapy pamphlets under the name of "going under the knife."

He was devoutly thankful that his "system" required practically no examining; he had simply to record and classify the symptoms as told him, and then retire somewhere to consult his hand-book of Tonico-Therapy, which would tell him what the disease was and what the remedy. He hoped—he even went so far as to pray—that the patients would all be men.

On the day after the advertisement appeared, his first patient came. From the window he saw her mounting the steps, and he had a sort of paroxysm of fright. He wanted to hide. But Minnie had let her in, and there she was knocking at the door. She was a stout woman of forty or so, terribly in earnest. She sat down heavily, with a sigh, and began to describe, with great wealth of detail, the "torments" she endured with a "sick stomach." Her symptoms were extraordinarily complicated and diverse; she enumerated all the articles she "dassen't touch," and gave another list of dubious ones, which sometimes were harmless and again would be "rank poison."

"Like lead, those last sweet potatoes lay," she told him mournfully, "right *here*. Not a wink of sleep did I get that night. Just groaning and moaning."

Lionel listened in the proper attitude of dignified concern; he really felt sorry for the poor thing. And so afraid he couldn't help her. Still, he said reassuringly:

"Wait here a moment please, while I go into the laboratory. I'll prepare something that will relieve you."

(This is what he had planned to say, in order to give himself a chance to consult his "handbook.")

Minnie was in the dining-room when he entered.

"Oh, Lionel," she whispered, excitedly, "does she——"

"Keep quiet!" he said, very rudely, and began copying the proper prescription on his little pad.

"I find I've run out of one of my drugs," he told his

patient, "but here is a prescription. If you'll have this made up and take a teaspoonful three times a day, it will . . ."

"When shall I come again?"

"Oh, er—next week!"

She got up with another sigh, and straightened her hat.

"What's your fee, doctor?" she asked.

He turned scarlet; the idea of taking money from this poor vulgar, suffering soul disgusted him, shamed him. And suppose he weren't helping her at all?

"Two dollars," he muttered.

She laid a limp bill on the table, and went out.

III

In the next six months he had just seven patients. Summer was coming on again, and they hadn't a penny. He himself was shabby and cowed, the little girl was so ragged that the neighbours' children were told to avoid her. Minnie was reduced to big aprons. They were hungry and wretched, hounded by creditors, suffering from the intolerable restraints of poverty. Lionel hadn't even cigarettes. He pulled down the sign and went about looking for work again. Without success. He was the least desirable sort of worker there was. He had little physical strength, no manual ability, a faulty and useless education, and an unconsciously haughty and repellent manner. He went about exuding failure; he was shabby, gloomy and resentful. He knew he wasn't any good.

At the very end, on the brink of ruin, he did get a job, addressing envelopes for a big directory. There he sat, hour after hour, writing away, surrounded by a heart-breaking collection of human wrecks, men who terrified

him by their sinister incarnation of his own future. Old men, with broken shoes and no overcoats, with fawning smiles and drink-reddened noses, middle-aged men who had finished with life, still genteel, but fatally resigned.

He dallied with the thought of suicide. He couldn't endure life. In his heart he didn't care what happened to Minnie or to his child. They would be no worse off without him. He hated to see them. When he got home at night, he would not speak to them. He couldn't eat the coarse and ill-cooked food Minnie put before him. He couldn't sleep. He dreamed with sick longing of old days, of big, airy rooms, gay little suppers, he remembered his chest of drawers, with piles of clean linen and silk socks, his neckties, his boots. This unhappy slattern, this pale bit of a child, what had they to do with his dreams? They were unreal, didn't belong to him.

He lived in a ghastly solitude; he confided in no one, was in touch with no one. He believed that the human being did not live who could comprehend his anguish.

Spring came again, and he had become what he so feared, a man with broken boots and the air of having once been a gentleman. He was ashamed to ride on the train, ashamed to enter the lift in the office building, ashamed to sit at a lunch counter. He had really made up his mind to die, quickly, before he got ill and helpless, and had to be sent to a charity hospital.

He came home one evening as usual, striding down the street past all the neighbours with a scowl on his face. He went up the steps of his little house with a familiar feeling of disgust and fatigue. Minnie was nowhere about; he sat down, still with his hat on, and stared out of the window at the placid sky which the sun had so lately deserted, a clear and faintly luminous expanse, without clouds.

It occurred to him that the house was very still. No

sound from the kitchen or overhead. He didn't care, though. He didn't stir until it was quite dark; then he got up to find a match for his wretched cigar. It was odd, after all,—no one about, no lights anywhere. His indifference was mere bravado now; he wouldn't let himself call out . . .

When at last he did go upstairs he found an envelope addressed to himself on his bureau.

"My own dearest Lionel: I have gone away for just a little while, because I have a plan to help us all. Stay where you are, and I shall be able to send you some money very soon. Don't worry; everything will soon be all right, and we shall be all together again. Take care of yourself, dearest. Your loving, loving wife, Minnie. P.S.—There is a delicious meat pie for you in the ice box."

He read it again, and still it didn't stir his indifference. He ate the meat pie, an unusually pretentious dish which must have cost Minnie much time and trouble; he sat on the porch for a while and at last went to bed, to fall asleep easily. Minnie and Sandra gone? Very well; they couldn't be any worse off anywhere else.

He waked up just before dawn, with a shock of realisation. Minnie lost too! Everything gone! He began to think of what the poor little woman had suffered and endured, of her patience, her loyalty to him. He remembered her, working so anxiously, so blindly, not questioning, not complaining, trying her poor best to give him what comfort she could.

And *she* had had nothing. He wondered how in Heaven's name she had lived. He thought of the long days she had spent with her poor little child, the child she so loved, and whom she had had to see hungry and ragged. Her utter loneliness, her pitiful faith in him, her hope of finding in him all of life and happiness.

IV

For months he didn't know where she had gone. She wrote to him loyally and sent him money, but she had the letters posted in New York, and he could imagine no way of tracing her. With the money she sent him and what he earned, he managed to keep alive, and he stayed on in the miserable little house, as she had told him. He was so sunk in wretchedness that he no longer suffered. He sometimes had a violent longing for the sound of Minnie's pleasant voice, or to see her solicitous, kindly face, but his chief thought, his chief concern was his own health. He was ill; he knew it; he had that mysterious certainty of imminent danger which has nothing to do with symptoms.

Creditors hounded him, until he grew desperate. They wouldn't wait; he couldn't expect them to; he couldn't very well expect them to have implicit faith in Minnie's vague promise that everything would soon be all right. And that was all he could offer. The house was a pigsty, an offense, and he didn't care. For days at a time he didn't even shave. He used to look at himself in the mirror and laugh at the blue stubble on his haggard face, his uncut hair, his frayed necktie and dirty collar.

"Anyway I can't go any lower," he would tell himself, "I'm at the bottom!"

He recalled stories he had read of beach-combers, all sorts of derelicts, drifting through strange countries, and it occurred to him that they were probably people like himself, who had loved fine living, who had been fastidious, who couldn't adjust themselves to what was poor and ugly. And they were, he reflected, always saved in the end by some woman. Never by a woman in the

least like Minnie; always by some splendid, handsome creature. Like Frances.

He put that thought away from him, and that image.

He was literally driven out of the house. The gas was cut off, the telephone, and at last the water. He groped about in the dark for a day or two, even went to his work unwashed after the taps were empty, but he couldn't endure thirst. He wanted water to drink, lots of it.

He left the house; simply walked out of it and closed the door after him. He went to a cheap lodging house for men in the city, directed his mail forwarded there, and waited on and on.

He grew very sullen and angry. He wanted to write to Minnie, to tell her things, to complain: he cursed her infernal secretiveness, and muddle-headedness. Where in God's name was she and what was she trying to do?

At last, after six months, she wrote that she had a good position as housekeeper in Brownsville Landing, but that he'd better write her in care of the post-office at Sanasset, the next village, for she had "thought best" to call herself a widow.

He answered sharply that he wished to see her, and she'd have to arrange it. A bitter and resentful letter.

She answered with propitiating quickness, and proposed a meeting in the little wood. She brought him a package of sandwiches and some money, kissed him and consoled him and sent him back to New York like a baby pacified with a sugar plum. After that, he came out regularly every Saturday afternoon, and as regularly complained bitterly at the secrecy which appeared to him so unnecessary. But Minnie assured him that it was not, and entreated him to be patient until she had enough money saved to start a new home.

He grew more and more ill; at last she advised him to give up his work.

"I'll find you a place to board somewhere near," she said, "and you can rest for a few weeks."

Under the circumstances, it was extraordinarily difficult to find a place for him where there was no possibility of his hearing of Mr. Petersen and Mr. Petersen's household. She had to be satisfied with a room in a family of Hungarians who spoke very little English and knew no one outside of their own colony. They lived three miles away, in Sanasset.

The poor fellow was glad enough to rest, glad, too, to get away from the dreadful men's lodging house in the city. Minnie met him every day and brought him things to eat, which he took back to his clean, lonely little room and consumed with relish. Minnie explained to him that the family where she was housekeeper was very wasteful, very capricious.

"You might just as well have this," she would say, "Otherwise it would only be thrown away."

Naturally he was not altogether happy in such an existence, living on his wife's earnings, taking money from her even for his cigarettes, fed with the munificent scraps from her employer's table. He had nothing to do, no living soul to speak to, he was ill and growing no better. But he wasn't anything like so miserable as one might imagine. His feelings were all dull, torpid; he really didn't think at all. He was forced—literally forced by nature to lie quiescent, to rest.

He was, in a way, beginning to be healed of his terrible moral wounds in this solitude and idleness he so needed. He was not under the influence of anyone now; he was little by little going back to his old traditions.

And then came Minnie's note; exactly what the

familiar phrase calls a "bolt from the blue," a dazzling and awful blow.

"Dearest Lionel: For reasons which I will explain when I see you, I have thought best to call myself Mr. Petersen's wife. I want you to come back with him and I will explain *everything*. He thinks you are my brother, named Alec. Don't say anything to him, but wait until you have seen me. I am very ill. I cannot write any more.

MINNIE."

Even then he hadn't been much impressed; he did not realise what her words implied. Simply another piece of her tiresome chicanery; posing as someone's wife to make herself more important, or something of that sort. Treachery to himself he never suspected, or that she could possibly be actually guilty of bigamy. . . . Until Mr. Petersen told him of the baby that was expected. Minnie was to be the mother of another man's child!

Oh, even she couldn't explain that away, couldn't make him swallow that! He might be contemptible, a tool in her hands, but there was a limit, an end! He walked beside the innocent other man in the dark, smiling grimly to himself, filled with a curiously impersonal thirst for revenge. That woman must be exposed, disgraced, crushed. He was savagely delighted to do it. A long repressed and unrecognised wish came struggling to the surface of his mind, the wish to be free of her and her domination. So long as she loved him and was faithful to him, worked and schemed for him, he couldn't even wish to be rid of her. Only falseness in her could justify him, and he rejoiced now in finding her false.

"It's the end of her," he reflected, "of her and her beastly trickery!"

But it was not. When he got to the house, and actually saw her, ill, tortured with anxiety, when he once more heard her voice, his resolution failed him. It was

not so much through pity or affection, either; it was the woman's uncanny plausibility, the preposterous air of respectability she threw over all she did. He could not see her as a criminal.

Fate had reserved curious sufferings for him, unique pains. To live through that night, with honest Mr. Petersen, to be in his house, while Minnie bore his child. . . . And then, still at Mr. Petersen's side, to go in to her, and look at her son. . . .

He was in a state of utter chaos. His little girl didn't know him. In a year and a half she had quite forgotten him, was growing up contentedly under another man's roof. It hurt him beyond measure. He had no idea how he had changed, what with his beard, and the ravages of his illness. It gave him a sensation of being already dead and buried and forgotten.

He couldn't make himself feel as he believed he should feel. He could not hate Minnie, and he actually liked Mr. Petersen. And pitied them both. He thought, more seriously than he had ever thought before in his life, and came to a conclusion which was quite at variance with his tradition.

"I'm no good to Minnie or Sandra," he said to himself, "I'll go away, and leave them to the man who can take care of them."

And above all, he wished to consider Mr. Petersen. He was more anxious to spare him than to spare Minnie. His one comfort was that he was not "wronging" that honest man, that he was, in fact, making an honourable and terribly difficult sacrifice for him, in thus giving up to him not only Minnie but little Sandra. He would leave Mr. Petersen undisturbed in his fool's Paradise. He wanted passionately, with all his soul, to do this one decent thing, to atone for Minnie's sins and his own by this restitution. It saved him in his own eyes.

Minnie did not oppose him. But she begged him to wait until she was a little better. She was so heart-broken over the separation and so docile that he yielded, and waited there in Mr. Petersen's house during the days of her convalescence.

But, no sooner had she begun to grow well again than she began shamelessly to—as the novels say—persecute him with her attentions. He was immeasurably shocked; he told her plainly what he thought of such conduct. Under Mr. Petersen's very roof!

"But you're my own husband," said Minnie.

"Do you mean to say you're so depraved that you can't *see*? That you'd deceive that fine fellow again?"

"He's nothing to me," said Minnie, "I never even pretended to love him."

And added:

"I only did it for Sandra's sake."

"Didn't you know it was criminal? You're a *bigamist*. You——"

She began to cry.

"I know it! But a mother will do anything in the world for her child. If she's a true woman."

She was not to be convinced of wrong-doing. It wasn't nice to have two husbands; that she conceded: it was a painful and disagreeable necessity, her only means of providing for her child.

"And Chris never need know," she said. "It's not doing him any harm. In fact, he's very happy."

"Then you intend to go on like this forever?"

"Oh, I don't *know*!" she cried, impatiently, "one has to be guided by circumstances."

And they were all the guide she had. Or could they be called a guide, when she so deliberately manufactured them, and distorted them? Even the poor chap's love for Sandra she tried to utilise, in order to keep him near

her. She was continually throwing them together, fostering the child's affection for her "uncle."

"She didn't recognise you," she said. "Poor little baby! But she *knows* you. She feels *differently* toward you."

She was conscious that her own spell had waned; she could do nothing with him. No matter how she clung to him, how she implored him, he would not so much as say he loved her. He was absolutely impervious to her seductions, although he was touched by her blind love for him. She would have caused any suffering to Mr. Petersen if it would have benefited Lionel. He was, as she said, and he well knew, the only man she had ever cared for, the first and the last. She would even go so far as to admit that she regretted having been obliged to marry Mr. Petersen. Not because it was wrong, but because it hurt Lionel. She acknowledged that it had not been an altogether loyal act, although, like so very many of her sex, she couldn't see that a merely physical infidelity really mattered much. An idea that men have, which must be submitted to, because of its importance to them.

"But in my *heart*," she insisted, "there's never been anyone but you."

The war seemed to offer Lionel a remarkable opportunity for carrying out his plan with dignity and nobility. He might even get himself killed, which, according to his tradition, rights every wrong, wipes out every offense. He resisted Minnie's objections with firmness.

Then, so cruelly, before he had made his great renunciation, came Frances and the shameful and horrible revelation. He was forced to go away with Minnie; he couldn't desert her then, when she was so utterly alone. He tried to comfort her a little, and found it only too easy. She wasn't really very much ashamed or grieved.

She was willing, eager, to take up life with him again, the same slipshod and futile life of their former years. She looked forward happily to another little house, more amazing financial adventures, and, quite frankly, a subsidy from Mr. Petersen.

"He'd be *glad!*" she told Lionel, "On account of little Robert. And he has plenty of money. He could easily spare two or three thousand a year."

That was the final straw. Lionel said nothing against her scheme; he saw her decently settled in a respectable boarding-house, well-supplied with money salvaged from Mr. Petersen's housekeeping allowance; then he went away, disappeared. He left her a note, to say that he was going to enlist, but she never quite knew what became of him.

BOOK FIVE: THE VICTORIOUS
CONCLUSION

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I

MR. PETERSEN and Frances lingered at the table long after the meal was finished. Partly from fatigue, partly from embarrassment, neither of them cared to suggest getting up. For *how* were they to spend the evening? They couldn't sit down and read, as if nothing had happened, and certainly they couldn't talk. They would both have been delighted never to exchange another word.

There was an unusual air of peace and order. Sandra and the baby were in bed and asleep, wisely and lovingly managed by Frances. Mr. Petersen had gone up to look at them in their cribs, clean, quiet and happy. Mrs. Hansen was working away, without friction.

Yet it was an ominous quiet. There had been no "scene," no excitement. Simply Minnie had packed a bag and gone off in scornful silence, and Lionel had vanished. It would have been far better if there *had* been a scene; no matter how violent or disgraceful. The roused emotions were cheated, there was an exasperating lack of finality about it all, a sense of frustration. Mr. Petersen and Frances had not opened the subject at all. Mrs. Hansen of course was silent. Even Sandra had asked no questions. It wasn't natural!

Mr. Petersen had good reasons for his reticence. He was ashamed of his thoughts; he would not have divulged them to any living creature. Because he was longing and longing for Minnie, for the old turmoil and disorder, Sandra running round the table while he ate, for Minnie,

holding the crying baby on her lap and feeding it sugar and water from a spoon, Minnie in a wrapper, with her hair coming down, and her eternally anxious look, worn out after having accomplished nothing.

He was aware of Frances opposite him, beautiful, severely neat, in her starched blouse. He knew she was much better than Minnie, that she had been cruelly wronged, and was behaving nobly. And yet he felt no sympathy for her. All his pity was ridiculously, futilely given to Minnie. He did not even blame her. The upright, honourable Mr. Petersen was able to see the thing from her distorted angle; he could almost hear her saying:

“But I tried to do what seemed best at the time.”

No anger, no bitterness, only a great sense of bereavement and grief. He actually sat there worrying about her, thinking she had no money, afraid she would suffer without her children. . . . That poor tiny Viking, replica of himself, left now without a mother! And poor, poor mother, bereft of such a son!

II

Frankie's thoughts were altogether different. She *was* angry, burning with resentment against her sister. She *hated* her! She remembered Lionel's dreadful face when he had seen her, the shame and anguish in his eyes. Oh, she hated her! The man he might have been, and the thing Minnie had made of him!

She had as little sympathy for Mr. Petersen as he for her. Simply he didn't matter. When she looked at his stolid face, she felt that it wouldn't be hard to hate him, too.

What Lionel must have endured to force him into such a course! Living in Mr. Petersen's house, on Mr. Peter-

sen's bounty, seeing his wife living with Mr. Petersen, bearing his child! A feeling she didn't know was in her came rushing up; a longing to see Minnie suffer, even a little of what she had inflicted upon others. She couldn't stand Mr. Petersen's presence another moment—silly sheep—fatuous dupe of a vile woman!

She got up abruptly.

"I think I'll go upstairs to the children," she said. "Good-night!"

They were sleeping beautifully. She lighted a little night lamp and looked at them, these children of Minnie, with curiously mixed emotions. She bent over the baby; its fat little cheeks were puffed out, its earnest mouth closed in a sort of pout. An ineffable fragrance rose from the warm little body. Her breath stirred the fine fair hairs on its head, where the pulse still beat so pitifully. Child of that hated sister and that fool of a Petersen—but a baby none the less, and sacred and dear. She regarded it with love, she pitied the poor deserted little man. She touched the tiny clenched fist, and at once it seized upon her finger and clung to it blindly. Very gently she unclasped the absurd little fingers and went over to Sandra.

This was the child that should have been hers; Lionel's daughter. The baby was delightful, but Sandra——! She was a dream child, she was beauty in its purest, most exquisite moment. Her pale face, her clear features, her cloud of fine-spun hair, the slender grace of her little limbs, were, Frances thought, like some child angel in an old painting, altogether spiritual. She sat down beside her, to think. It helped her to look down at that innocent and fragile loveliness, sublimation of her poor lover. She grew softer; at last began to weep a little.

Very much later, toward two in the morning, she went

down to find Mr. Petersen. She was quite sure he would not be in bed.

There he was, in his study, reading something.

"Mr. Petersen," she said, "I've been thinking—about the children."

He looked at her mutely.

"It seems to me—if you'd like me to—it would be better if I stopped here and looked after them."

"I thought you were going abroad," he said, stupidly.

"I don't care much where I go, as long as I'm more or less useful. And it seems to me that I could be, here."

He couldn't answer.

"I'd like—— How can I help you best about them?" she asked.

He still stared at her in speechless misery. He tried in vain to picture his future life, tried to realise that he was left with two small children who had no mother. Useless. He could imagine no other person in Minnie's place. No one but Minnie looking after those children; anyone else would be an impostor, a fraud, intolerable.

"I don't know," he said, "I haven't thought much about it yet."

"I'd do my best for them," Frances said, with something like entreaty in her voice.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Petersen, "they may take away Sandra."

And to his horror, a sob escaped him. He could not endure the idea of losing that beloved little girl; he fancied her gone, and his own poor baby more solitary than ever. Like a flash came the full realisation of the wreck of his life, the desolation ahead of him. He bowed his head in his huge hands.

Frances came over to him.

"Please!" she said, "Mr. Petersen!"

It was the first time she had felt any pity for him; she had pitied Lionel, pitied herself; now her heart was wrung for this poor fellow, innocent as herself, and more wronged.

"Anyway," she said, "you have your little boy."

"That makes it worse," he answered, in a muffled voice.

"He is an illegitimate child. He is disgraced."

"Oh, you don't believe such things!" cried Frances. "You're far too sensible and broad-minded for that, I know!"

"No, no, I'm not. . . . If it was the ordinary thing—a passion—a love affair. . . . But she—lived here as my wife. . . . Everyone knew her."

He raised his head and looked at her with honest, misty, blue eyes.

"What am I to say? Bigamy is a crime. She is a bigamist. I've got to keep it quiet. We were married here; it's in the register. . . . I cannot tell anyone she was not my wife. I'll have to let it be thought that she deserted me—ran off with this—this chap we called her brother. I'll be the laughing stock of the place. Under his nose it went on, the neighbours will say. And I was a fool. Such a fool! I can't believe it . . . ! My boy is going to hear all that in the course of time."

"Can't you leave here?"

"I've built up my name and reputation here. At my age—to start all over again. . . ."

"I'm very sorry," she said simply.

"Thank you," he replied.

She could see that he wanted to be alone, and that he was not able to think then of the future. He was too bitterly concerned with the past and with the present. She said good-night to him, and went upstairs again, to be near the children.

III

She was awakening next morning by a cry from the baby, and she sprang up at once, to wait on it, to adore it, to serve it in any capacity.

She hurried down stairs to the ice box to fetch the bottle she had prepared overnight for it, warmed it, and flew up again to quiet its hearty cries. But it stopped directly she entered the room, and lay on her lap, swallowing the milk and staring at her, with its father's great, solemn blue eyes. It didn't cry again all morning; it was a baby of a happy and serene disposition. She put it back in its crib and it lay there, watching its own fat hands, while she dressed Sandra. The little girl was very quiet and docile, she fetched her own clean clothes and stood passively to have them buttoned. Just once, while her hair was being brushed, she looked up with her clear unfaltering gaze, and asked:

"Where's Mother?"

"She's gone away for a while, my darling. You'll be happy with Aunt Frankie, won't you?"

"I don't know," Sandra answered, truthfully.

It was still very early, so Frances got breakfast ready without waiting for Mrs. Hansen. Mr. Petersen came down at seven, and he was mighty glad to get his hot coffee. He sat down heavily opposite Frances, and drained his cup.

"If you could stay," he began, apologetically, "just a few days, anyway—just a little while—till I get settled? I wasn't—I didn't appreciate your goodness last night. But I do now. Just for a day or two?"

"As long as you like," Frances answered, heartily.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I

THE time went by well enough for Frankie. She was busy, and after a fashion, happy, with the children. She had long ago trained herself not to search her own heart, not to indulge her own emotions, not to think of Lionel. No more now than during all the past five years.

With the assistance of Mrs. Hansen she put the house in order, all the queer, jumbled cupboards and closets and bureau drawers. They found the most extraordinary things. They were obliged to tell Mr. Petersen that Minnie had been in debt to half a dozen tradesmen, enormous bills that she would reduce dollar by dollar. He paid them at once, without question. They found clothes of Mr. Petersen's hidden away—no doubt to be given to Lionel. They found pawn-tickets for some of the silver spoons. Curious records of a subterranean life. . . . But at last they cleaned away all traces of her rule; her clothes and personal belongings were packed away, until she should send for them; she was sternly and justly effaced.

Frances had begun to recover, to become inwardly as serene as she was in appearance. When suddenly her makeshift peace was again destroyed.

They were at lunch, Frances, Mr. Petersen and Sandra, an exemplary group, almost too decorous, all consuming exactly the right sort of food for their health, served at the right moment. Then Mrs. Hansen brought in his letter, and without thinking, Frankie tore it open, and

saw his writing again. She folded it again and sat through the meal; so very long before she could shut herself into her own room, and read it.

"Frankie: I can't get into the army in any branch. I got one of the doctors to tell me, and he said I had tuberculosis and couldn't last more than a year or two at the most. Frankie, I can't do it. What's the use, anyway, of waiting on like that, and dying in a charity hospital? I'm going to go now, as decently as I can. Don't tell them, not even where I am. I want to be left in peace. But I wish you would come after it is all over. I will leave you a note. Good-bye. God bless you, dear old girl. L."

She hurried to him. She found him in a little basement room like a cell, below the level of the street, with a barred window looking out on a filthy courtyard. She had steeled herself for this meeting; she was prepared for anything; she didn't wince, didn't falter, at the sight of his ghastly face. He stood before her in the dim light, a gaunt, stooping figure in a frayed suit; he looked really frightened at the sight of her. He had said good-bye to her forever in his own soul; he wasn't prepared, wasn't *capable* of seeing her again.

He tried to tell her something of his story; especially he insisted upon how he hadn't "wronged" Mr. Petersen. He was very earnest about that.

"I don't want you to think me worse than I am," he said.

"My dear, I wouldn't," she assured him, gently.

He stared at her with his great hollow eyes.

"Frankie!" he cried, "You do understand, don't you? That it was—I don't know—a mistake of some sort. I can say it now. I always—loved you. Always. Never anyone else."

She had a chill dread of what she felt he was about to ask her.

"If you could say—even a word——?"

She got up and went to him as he sat hunched up on a trunk; she stroked his hair very gently. She wanted terribly to give him some little comfort, but she couldn't feed him with lies, even though he were starving.

"It's all over and done with now, Lionel," she said. "It's better to try and forget it."

"But, Frankie. . . . If I could only know. . . . If you'd changed. . . . If you still care for me?"

"It's no use talking of that, my dear."

"Only tell me, before I die!" he entreated.

She looked up at him sorrowfully. And suddenly he clasped her in his arms, such a pitiful, desperate embrace! She clung to him, sobbing, strained him to her.

"Oh, I did, I did love you!" her heart cried. "When it was you. But not this ghost—this distortion of what was you!"

But she didn't say it, didn't say anything, she was too full of an aching and dreadful pity. Nothing on earth could save him; she saw death in his face; she knew that she was saying good-bye to him forever. He knew it, too. Ineffable moment! There were no words for it; they clung to each other, hopelessly, in an abandon of grief.

II

She persuaded him to go to a sanitarium she knew of; he didn't want to, didn't want to linger on, at her expense. But for her sake, for the sake of her anguish, he consented. He lived there nearly six months, writing to her now and then, stiff, stupid little notes. He died rather suddenly.

She never again mentioned him to a living soul; no

one else knew what had happened to him. She let him die in peace, rest in peace. She went on just as usual; it was her pride to keep her pain to herself, to hide it absolutely. She never forgot him; really remained faithful to that pitiful wraith. She had duties, interests, even pleasures enough, she lived vigorously and fully. But that wound never healed. She was never again conscious of absolute content, or of real hope. She never regarded the future with eagerness. Her heart was not whole.

III

Mr. Petersen was becoming crushed by his disgrace. The amazing change of mistresses in his establishment had caused a tremendous scandal. He tried to go on as usual, but it was not possible. Many people shunned him, business fell off, the general atmosphere of respect in which his soul had flourished was poisoned, and unfit for his great lungs to breathe.

And, what is more, he worried very much about Frankie. The presence of this handsome young woman in his house, coincident with the disappearance of Minnie and Lionel, was a fact of ugly significance. He began very soon to see his course; he deliberated carefully, looked at it from her point of view as well as from his own, and came at last to the conclusion that it was a good plan.

He asked Frances to marry him.

"On account of the children," he said, "You are so fond of them that I thought you would like to remain with them permanently. And it would be of the greatest benefit to them. . . . As for yourself, I haven't much to offer. . . . I can only promise that I wouldn't bother you, interfere with you in any sort of way. I can't stop here. I'm—more or less—disgraced. . . . I'll live

wherever you like, California, if that's best for your work. I have enough capital to start in business again——”

She was not surprised by his offer; she had expected it and thought about it. To her also it seemed the best course, on account of the children. So she accepted.

They understood each other perfectly, without being obliged to drag from their souls any explanation of feelings sacred and painful. These two candid and faithful creatures knew themselves to be strong enough and simple enough for a most difficult situation. They were tacitly agreed to remain constant, he to Minnie, she to Lionel, and to assume the poor little burdens deserted by them.

Frances was not anxious to return to California; she suggested a suburb of New York, in quite another direction from Brownsville Landing, and Mr. Petersen consented. She found a charming house there, the sort of house she had dreamed long ago of having with Lionel, a dignified, cheerful place with a fine garden. She had quite a bit of money saved, and she insisted upon using some of it to equip the place.

“Please don't be proud!” she entreated Mr. Petersen, laughing. “Do let me have my own way about all this. I've always longed to furnish a house.”

This touched him. The poor defrauded girl! So he left it all to her.

She had a wonderful time over it, particularly with the children's rooms. She was wilfully extravagant there. She had a nursery for little Robert, very scientific and expensive, with a bathroom off it, glitteringly white. Then a big, bright playroom, with little white-painted chairs and tables gay with painted birds and animals, with low shelves for toys, and not a sharp corner anywhere about; and next to this, an exquisite nest for Sandra, all white willow and blue chintz.

She spent days and days in the house, with Mrs. Hansen to help her. She would come back to Brownsville Landing—a five hours' journey—very tired, but filled with enthusiasm. Mr. Petersen went out once or twice and found it charming. He planted a garden there, fruit trees and rose bushes, and had a stable built for his beloved horse.

When at last the house was ready there was nothing else to wait for. They went, one gay, cool morning in September, to the City Hall in New York, got their license, and were married by a peevish alderman. They were both curiously devoid of emotion. It was, after all, a matter of little importance to them. They would go on as they had been going for the last months.

Nevertheless, they considered it the polite and the correct thing to celebrate in some sort of way. So they went to a hotel, where Mr. Petersen ordered an elaborate lunch. He was just a little ill-at-ease, not being a frequenter of hotels, and the lunch was too heavy, too prolonged. Frankie conscientiously ate all she could, and praised everything.

But no use denying that her heart ached! She caught a glimpse of themselves in a mirror, saw her own proud distinction so incongruously escorted by Mr. Petersen's enormous Socialistic bulk, and how could she help thinking of how Lionel had looked under similar circumstances, how help remembering *his* ways of ordering lunches. . . . ?

Perhaps Mr. Petersen was rather heavy-hearted too, with memories of his other wedding—or what he had imagined at the time to be a wedding. Who knows but that for him there had been infinite romance in his dowdy Minnie?

They had planned to go back to Brownsville Landing and close up the house there, and then the next morn-

ing proceed by motor car with the children and the Hansens to the new home. For the last time they boarded the train, for the last time went flying through that familiar country along the river bank.

"I suppose," said Mr. Petersen, in his slow way, "that we are beginning a new life. I shall do all I can to make it a happy one for you."

She smiled at him kindly.

"We're old friends," she said, and then grew very serious, "Chris," she said, "we've missed—oh, almost everything, haven't we? But if we can only make up to the children for all *they've* lost, all *they'll* have to miss—that's enough for us, isn't it?"

"That's enough," he repeated, "enough to fill our lives."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I

SHE came in upon them like a whirlwind, as they sat at the dinner table, and at the sight of their familiar faces, she gave a sort of sob of relief, and flung herself into a chair. They looked at her, pulling off her torn old gloves, and they had, both of them, an illusion that it was entirely *her* house, *her* home, that they had nothing to say in it.

Her face was pale and worn, and bright with hysterical excitement. It didn't occur to her that she was expected to explain her presence; she was preoccupied with some thought of her own. Suddenly she looked up, at Frances.

"He's gone!" she cried. "He would go. Into the army. I thought——" she broke into open sobbing, "I thought . . . he was . . . too thin . . . but he left me a note . . . to say they've taken him. Oh, *poor* old Lionel! *Poor* old darling!"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"It's so terribly pitiful!" she went on. "I never . . . in all my life. . . . Oh, his arms are like little sticks. . . ."

She turned fiercely on Mr. Petersen.

"The idea of *his* being in the army, while *you* sit at home, a big, hearty thing like you!" she cried, passionately. It was the same spirit which led so many women to press recruiting.

Mr. Petersen's face turned scarlet. He cleared his throat, and answered at last, in his slow way:

"I don't see——" he began.

"Of course you don't! You never would. You haven't any spirit in you. You just want to sit at home and——"

Frances intervened.

"I don't think it's quite your place to come here and abuse Mr. Petersen," she said sternly.

"What have *you* got to do with it?" asked Minnie, "it's none of your business, that I can see."

She dried her eyes and sat up straighter.

"Where are the babies?" she asked.

"Asleep," Frances answered.

Minnie got up and went toward the door, but Frances intercepted her.

"Let them alone!" she ordered.

Minnie stared at her.

"What do you *mean*! They're *my* children."

"They're not! You've forfeited your right to them. You deserted them. You've disgraced them. I won't . . . I won't let you disturb them!"

Minnie's fine black eyes stared at her scornfully.

"They're my children. I'll do just as I think best about them. I've got on very well without consulting you so far, and I shan't begin now."

"Chris!" Frances appealed to Mr. Petersen, "Won't you say something? You know she's not fit to bring up children."

"It takes an old maid to do that," said Minnie.

That roused Mr. Petersen.

"Minnie," he began, "it would be better—if you would consent . . ."

"I won't consent to anything! I want my children, and I *will* have them. I'm going to take them now."

"But—I have something to say about it," he protested.

"You haven't! Sandra's not yours, and little Rob-

ert's *mine*. I asked a lawyer. You're not my husband. You haven't any claim on him."

Frances rose.

"Minnie," she said, "listen to me!"

She looked like the goddess Athene, so handsome, so stern, so just.

"You must have *some* sort of conscience—*some* standard—something I can appeal to. . . . You've wronged me, you've wronged Mr. Petersen, in the cruelest way. You've brought shame and suffering on innocent people. You've thought only of yourself and your own desires, and had no mercy on anyone who stood in your way. And now you want to do something still worse. Just for your own selfish gratification, you want to take those poor little children away from people who are able and willing to do everything for them—honourable and decent people——"

"I suppose you mean yourself," said Minnie, "I suppose you and Chris intended to start housekeeping with *my* children. Well, you can't!"

"If you love them, Minnie, you can't drag them into poverty and——"

"Oh, love, love, love!" cried Minnie impatiently. "What do you know about loving, anyway? When I love people, I fight for them. I'd die for them. . . . Or I'd murder. I'd do *anything*. I wouldn't stop to reason and plan like you do. You couldn't keep my babies away from me if you had an army of soldiers to help you."

And she pushed by her sister and went upstairs.

They heard a sudden wild little shout.

"Oh, *Mummy!*" from Sandra. Then a number of sounds, Minnie walking about, opening bureau drawers, the creak of a rocking chair.

It tortured Mr. Petersen, brought back old days. He

felt that if he went up now he would see Minnie in her horrible grey wrapper, with the baby in her arms, rocking away, just in the same way, with the gas turned low and Sandra sitting up in her crib. And then, when the baby was asleep, Minnie would come down, exhausted, sighing, but smiling too, and trail out into the kitchen, to look in the ice chest for something to eat. And then to sit on the arm of his chair and gossip. . . . He could not repress a groan.

"Oh, Minnie!" he whispered.

Frances looked at him with a pity not untinged with contempt. She knew he wasn't thinking of the children at all.

"Chris!" she said, in a low voice.

"Yes?"

"*Don't* tell her—that we're married!"

He nodded assent.

They remained at the table, in silence. There was nothing to do, nothing to say, but to wait for Minnie's next move.

Presently she came downstairs, carrying the baby and holding Sandra by the hand, all of them dressed for the street. Minnie's eyes were red; evidently she had been crying up there.

"Good-bye, Chris," she said, rather wistfully, "I'm sorry about all this. . . . But I had to do it, really, for Sandra's sake. And I did make you happy, and comfortable, didn't I?"

"Yes, yes!" he cried, and actually believed that she had. The pathos of the anxious little figure overwhelmed him.

"Minnie!" he cried. "Wait! Just a minute!"

She turned again.

"If—your—he has gone in to the army—what will you have to live on?"

"I don't know," she said, "I'll get on somehow."

"No! . . . That can't be. . . . For old times' sake—let me help you—and the children. An allowance—a settlement of some sort . . ."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you, Chris dear," she said, simply.

"If Frances will take the baby," he suggested, "I'd like to speak to you in my office just a moment."

So Frances sat in the dining-room, with the baby in her arms for the last time, holding Sandra's little hand, forgotten and deserted, despoiled now of everything, while in the study Mr. Petersen wrote a generous cheque for Minnie.

She thought of the house in the suburbs, with the nursery and the playroom; even the new toys.

She thought of herself and Mr. Petersen married, for the sake of the children.

She thought of Minnie, who had carried off Lionel, and Lionel's child, and Mr. Petersen's child, and was now securing a supply of Mr. Petersen's money.

She began to laugh heartily.

THE END

EPILOGUE

MR. PETERSEN saw Minnie once again. He and Frances *did* go to California to live, because they naturally couldn't endure the mocking house in the suburbs, or the dreadful one in Brownsville Landing.

They did well enough; they were both able to make money and to save it; they were kind, industrious, charitable, very much respected. They never quarrelled, and never grew any more intimate or affectionate. A drab sort of life, and they knew it.

It was a good thing that Mr. Petersen was both thrifty and well-to-do, for Minnie's demands on him were constant and outrageous. Her old obsession broke out again; she wrote asking for capital to start a boarding-house. The allowance he sent her didn't suffice; she wanted, so she said, to become independent.

And did, in a most original way. All the money she took in from her boarders she regarded as profit, and belonging to her, while the bills, when they grew too pressing, were sent to Mr. Petersen with complicated and aggrieved letters complaining of the troubles of a landlady. Her independence was a heavy drain on him.

He asked Frances if she minded his going East to see her and the children once more.

"It's ten years," he said. "Robert'll be quite a boy now."

"Of course I don't mind," she answered, "I'd half like to see them myself; especially Minnie. I'm curious."

Her boarding-house, so familiar to him financially, for

which he was endlessly buying saucepans and tablecloths and towels, was a dingy old place in the west Twenties. Even from the outside it had the Minnie touch, bedraggled lace curtains and crooked shades.

He rang the bell, and waited with a fast beating heart. To see Minnie again, after all this time!

The door was opened reluctantly by a young girl. (Everything in that house was done reluctantly).

"Mrs. Naylor? I'll see . . . Is it about rooms?"

Surely that voice, that accent . . . ? He stared at her insistently in the darkness of the hall.

"Why!" he cried, "Isn't it Sandra? Come into the light, my dear. Do you remember Uncle Chris?"

"I've heard Mother speak of you," she answered listlessly, and turned up the gas.

"Oh, Sandra!" he cried again. "My dear . . . ! You're—you don't look very well!"

"I'm all right," she replied, in languid surprise. "I've always been thin."

"Thin!" he thought. "My child, you're dying!"

But he said only that she was growing too fast, and smiled and patted her head.

He waited in the dark hall while she went to fetch her mother, and he was haunted by her awful and heart-breaking loveliness—the unmistakable shadow on her face.

She came back to lead him down into the basement. He noticed that there were holes in her stockings and that her dress was very shabby.

In the basement dining-room he found Minnie, and was welcomed without much cordiality. And if Sandra had shocked him in one way, Minnie shocked him in another. She was so much changed; so much older, she had quite a middle-aged look, she was much stouter, she was—he couldn't deny it—she was almost common, with

her bright eyes and her sharp nose and her double chin. And as badly dressed as ever, perhaps a little more spotty. Her old air of anxiety had left her, it was now no more than a shadow, a comfortable way of sighing at life in general. She was happier than she had ever been before. Her health was excellent, she was free to do as she pleased, and she was much admired. She had had more than one offer of marriage from boarders who respected the fortitude, the maternal affection and the business ability of this remarkable woman. But she had no further use for men.

"I've seen enough of them!" she would say. It was evident that she had suffered bitterly at their hands.

Her air towards Mr. Petersen implied that she was magnanimously willing to let bygones be bygones. They talked of the boarders; they were, for the most part, satisfactory, she said. The usual troubles, which one must expect in this life, above all if one were a woman alone in the world, and honest.

He spoke of Sandra. Minnie admitted that she was not strong, but that in her circumstances, she couldn't do much for her.

"Send her out to us," he urged. "The climate would be just the thing for her."

"No, *thanks!*" Minnie answered, with irony, indicating her opinion of the tone of Mr. Petersen's household.

He offered to pay for any course of treatment, for sending her away. But Minnie said, sharply, that it wasn't necessary; she would outgrow her weakness; there wasn't any reason for making such a fuss about it. He saw with amazement that this child whom she had formerly idolised was now the object of an unmistakable resentment which he could not comprehend. He wouldn't have believed that it was jealousy; that as the child became a woman she became, to the instinctive female with-

in Minnie, a rival. She was always trying to turn the talk away from Sandra to Robert. *He* was clever, *he* was obedient, *he* was, she said, altogether a comfort to her.

At last he came in from school, and Mr. Petersen ever afterward regretted his visit. If he could only have kept the memory of his stalwart tiny son, with his clear blue eyes and his gleeful smile!

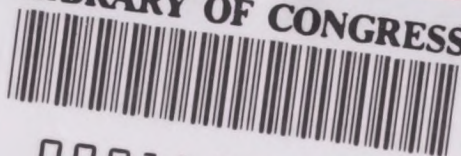
This Robert was a pale, heavy boy of eleven or twelve, lazy, complacent, maddeningly adult in manner. He sat down with the conscious intention of entertaining this visitor, told him things he had read in the papers. It was evident he did not know he was speaking to his father. Mr. Petersen gave him some money, and in his heart completely disowned him.

Then he looked once more at *her*, a long, long look.

"Good-bye, Minnie!" he said.



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